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THE KNIFE CHAMPION ROSE IN HIS STIRRUPS AND HURLED THE MISSILE WITH ALL HIS MIGHT, HIS TWO WAITING PARDS BEHOLDING THE SIGNAL FEAT.

OR,

SIX-FOOT ST'S CLEAN SWEEP.

A Companion Story to "Bareback
Buck, the Centaur of the Plains."

BY PHILIP S. WARNE,
AUTHOR OF THE "TIGER DICK SERIES," "AL-
WAYS ON HAND," "SILVER SID," "CALI-
FORNIA KIT," "THE GENTLEMAN FROM
PIKE," "A HARD CROWD," ETC.

CHAPTER I.

"STILL A-KICKIN'."

It was a chopfallen party returning to Bloody
Run, and this is how it happened.

A ragged and thumb-worn piece of brown
paper, traced with a rude map and several lines
of unintelligible characters—that was the pre-
cious cryptogram which held the secret of the
Lost Mine.

A fresher bit of brown paper, written upon
with straggling English script—this was the
secret which Bob Cady had wrenched from its
covert, after four years of brain-racking, till

alternating hope and despair drove him to the verge of madness.

Then, when his heart was well-nigh bursting with visions of reunion with the woman he loved, and of long years in which he would reward her constancy through that cheerless separation with all that money could buy—then came murder and robbery at the hands of his treacherous partner, Joe Moran!

Swindling his confederates, Hank Budlong and his outlaw band, out of their share of the plunder, Moran fled to Bloody Run.

Like Rome of old, the Run was a nest of criminals, so banded together and loyal to any of their fraternity, come he whence he might, that it was their boast that no sheriff's posse had ever invaded their camp and got away with his man.

But who could have guessed the avenger who was to arise against the false pard?

Bob Cady's sweetheart, Beth Crawford, having crossed the continent to join her lover, found him dead, hacked with ghastly wounds that cried to Heaven with a thousand tongues!

She it was—a woman, yet goaded out of all womanly weakness and gentleness by her nameless wrong—who pursued the murderer into the den of human wolves where he had found refuge, resolved to requite blow for blow in pitiless revenge!

But one there was who loved her, and whose chivalrous nature revolted at the thought of a woman burdening her conscience with such a deed; and to save her from this act of madness, Six-foot Si followed her, so disguised that no one suspected that the hero of Mulligan's Bend was lurking in their midst.

After weeks of subtle intriguing, Beth Crawford recovered the cryptogram which was rightfully hers, only to fall, at the very moment of success, so helpless that she would never have escaped save in the strong arms of Six-foot Si, who bore her to safety at Mulligan's Bend, in one of the wildest rides in all the romantic history of the Great West.

Not ten minutes after their flight, Hank Budlong's band made their descent upon the camp, to gain only the poor satisfaction of riddling the swindler with bullets, in their rage at finding that he in turn had lost the price of his treachery.

Bloody Run was avowedly under the rule of one Dandy Dave, but it was everybody's secret that he had a formidable rival in the person of Old-man Crocker.

Having learned of the cipher, this man, whose bloody record made him a power among his villainous townsmen, let the disappointed road-agents escape, while he led the men of Bloody Run in pursuit of Six-foot Si, ostensibly to avenge Joe Moran and recover "his girl," but really to get possession of the precious cryptogram for his own personal advantage.

Though Si had three horses to use in turn, and rode them all till they could bear him and his scarcely conscious charge no longer, yet he would have been captured after the fall of his last horse, but for the jealousy between Dandy Dave and Old-man Crocker.

Each preferring to lose the prize rather than have the other secure it, they had come to a personal encounter, by which Six-foot Si profited to make good his escape.

The men of Bloody Run were not a little surprised to see the rival leaders, having once got fairly at it, stop short of mutual slaughter; but it pleased Dandy Dave and Old-man Crocker to call their battle a draw, and each to bide his time, with plainly no love lost between them.

So now, having chased the fugitives fairly into Mulligan's Bend, they were returning home, a chopfallen party, as has been said.

There a ghastly spectacle awaited them.

"What be you 'lowin' to do with this hyar carrion?" asked Dandy Dave, looking with no little suspicion upon Old-man Crocker's uncharacteristic solicitude for the unconscious Joe Moran.

"I'm 'lowin' to make good live meat of it, ef I kin," replied Crocker.

"Hi, thar, Chippy!" he hailed a sneaking little rascal who was glad to serve him and get the protection of the great man in return. "You clip it fur Saw-bones the best you know how."

"What good is he to you?" persisted Dandy Dave.

"No good," answered Crocker, going on with his preparations to have Moran lifted on a blanket and carried into his shanty.

"Then what fur be you throwin' away time on him?"

"I happen to cotton to him."

"You don't owe him nothin'?"

"Then he'll owe me somethin', ef he ever comes round."

Old-man Crocker looked Dandy Dave in the eye, and went on, quietly:

"I reckon we'll make out between us."

Dandy Dave shrugged his shoulders.

"I wish you luck!"

And turning, he rode away toward the center of the camp.

"Humph!" ejaculated Old-man Crocker, looking after him with a shrewd contraction of the eyes, "he's a healthy pump, he is! Wouldn't

he like to know what I'm up to, though? Waal, ef he's sickenin' fur a sight o' my hand, all he's got to do is to straddle my blind, an' go in fur all he's worth."

Dandy Dave too had his reflections.

"Cotton to him!" he muttered, scornfully. "Him cotton to anybody! Thar's a mint in it somewhar, when that ole corpse-layer falls to an' pulls anybody out o' the grave. Waal, I 'low to lay fur him, I do; an' that's what's the matter with me!"

Meanwhile Chippy was seeking the disciple of Esculapius at the various shrines of Bacchus with which the camp abounded.

Usually, when his services were in demand, Saw-bones would bob up serenely, after the scrimmage was over, from behind some barrier where he had run to cover while the bullets flew like hail-stones, since it was a standing joke with him, that his business was to pick lead out of the bodies of others, not to catch it in his own.

But, in keeping with his invariable custom, he had spent the first half of the night in getting "stone-blind," and as there had been no one to see that he was put to bed, he was now found lying under the lee of a shanty wall.

It was necessary to put him under the "pump"—a bucket plied in the creek that ran through the camp; but when they stood him on his feet, he was as steady as a judge, and ready for business:

"All but one leetle taste, fur to take off the curse o' the water!"

He sent for his instrument case, with its needles and probes and knives and scissors and saws, and lint and bandages and sticking-plaster, and walked with a firm, brisk step to where his patient lay.

"Waal! waal! what do ye want handsomer'n that?" he cried, as he made a preliminary examination of the numerous ghastly wounds, on which the blood had dried. "But, bless my soul an' body! how long has the poor feller been in this shape? Half a day wouldn't do it!"

"He's been a-layin' out yander on the ground ever sence a right smart spell before midnight," answered Old-man Crocker, following the surgeon's movements with an anxious eye.

"Waal, I sw'ar!" ejaculated Saw-bones, turning to stare at his informant. "Why didn't you fetch me hyar hours ago?"

"I reckon the heft of us was pikin' after the Teaser," replied Crocker, indicating Six-foot Si by a sobriquet he had assumed for the purposes of carrying out his disguise.

"What's his chances, Doc?" he went on, anxiously.

"Slim!" was the surgeon's prompt verdict. "I wouldn't give the lead he's got in him fur his show."

"Oh, gammon! He can't be so bad off as that."

But it was plain that the wish was father to the hope.

"Was you ever filled full o' slugs, an' then laid by to dreem fur twelve hours?" asked Saw-bones, with facetious deliberateness.

"No, I never was," Crocker was fain to admit.

"Waal, then, don't you go fur to shootin' off your mouth tell you've been thar."

However, the first use Joe Moran made of recovered consciousness, was to declare, in a just audible whisper:

"I'm worth a dozen dead men yit!"

And Joe, as everybody admitted, had certainly "been thar."

But he was not yet "out of the woods," as he was soon to learn.

"Onderstand!" was Old-man Crocker's parting injunction, on the day following, "I don't want no sleepin' on duty; an' ef that snoozer"—this allusion being to Dandy Dave—"comes nosin' about hyar, you rouse me out, no matter how I'm a-puttin' in o' my time."

"You kin tie to me, pard—you know that," answered Chippy, with a great show of zeal.

"I'll tie somethin' to ye, ef you git me in a hole!" returned Crocker, ungraciously.

Chippy's countenance fell. When he tried to do "jest the purtiest he knowed how," his reward was that of a willing donkey—a heavier load and more "lickin'."

Not troubling himself to observe the effect of his method, Old-man Crocker strode off toward the Bucking Burro.

This was the place of general entertainment of the camp. Here were music and singing and dancing, each after its kind—and drinking and gambling and swearing and "big talk," all of the choicest.

It was this that made Chippy gaze after his retiring master with bitterness.

"Thar he goes, jest a-whoopin' of it up all the while, as if life wa'n't nothin' but whisky an' jack-pots; an' hyar I sets, a-gittin' o' my fun out o' this hyar thing!"

Words could go no further. Chippy ruminated in silence on the inequalities of fortune in this mysterious life.

Cleverer men than he have "given it up!"

But a fretful voice broke in upon his reflections, coming from within the shanty on the door-stone of which he had been left standing.

"Chippy! Oh, Chippy! Whar in Cain is that thar lazy snoozer, anyway? He's cleared

out an' left me hyar to die, an' good enough fur me, too! A dead dog don't eat nobody's meat!"

This summing up of human selfishness was followed by a series of inarticulate whines and groans that ought to have moved a heart of stone.

Chippy was no philanthropist. He did about what his contract called for, and "if that didn't suit the patient, he could shout!"

When he finally responded to the call, vindicating his dignity by the slowness of his movements, he demanded, surlily:

"What in blazes be you kickin' up all this hyar row about?"

In a bunk nailed against the wall lay what was left of Joe Moran, a pitiable spectacle in all truth, thin and ghastly pale save the hectic glow in his hollow cheeks, and with his sunken eyes glistening with feverish brilliancy.

His body doubled all in a heap in the uncomfortable "hurrah's-nest" in which he lay, nothing but his head appeared above the rumpled blankets; and a bloody bandage bound about his temples was horribly suggestive of what was hidden from view.

As Chippy stood frowning down upon him savagely, he began to whimper and snivel with the weakness of spent vitality.

"You ain't usin' me well, Chippy—you know that yerself!"

"Usin' ye well?" growled Chippy, like an angry gorilla. "I'm a-usin' of ye a heap sight better'n you deserve, an' you know that!"

"I'm on your han's hyar. You kin do with we what you like. I ain't no good, I ain't!"

"What did you give me away to the ole man fur—hey?" bellowed Chippy, looking as if he meditated shaking his patient, in retaliation.

"Don't you tech me!" whimpered Moran, in trembling alarm.

"Tech ye! Blast yer eyes, I'll fall to an' mall all Cain out o' ye, ef you ever throw off on me the like o' that ag'in!"

"But you didn't give me them powders what Saw-bones put up for me, an' the grub, when I got it—which the same I had to wait your motions, an' they was what you'd call slow yerself, ef you had an empty graveyard inside o' ye, an' all the tombstones piled on the pit o' yer stomach—the grub would gag a grunter! God only knows what thar was in it!"

"Grub! Why, blast ye!—you'd better say grace, whatever you git, an' whenever you git it! Do you 'low as I'm goin' to set up all night to shovel quail-on-toast down your maw?"

"But I'd like to know how I'm to git well, ef I don't git no grub an' no medicine."

"Well? Who cares whether you git well or not?"

Joe Moran did not venture to suggest anybody. Possibly he was conscious of some measure of demerit in himself. Thus far in life he had taken whatever the world left within his reach, making as little return as possible.

"Now, look 'a' hyar!" said Chippy, shaking his finger with the air of a man who was laying down a finality. "I'm runnin' this hyar thing, an' I'm runnin' it to suit myself. Ef it ain't to your likin', so much the worse fur you. But one thing you freeze to. Ef you spl't on me ag'in, I'll rub ye out!"

And by way of emphatic illustration, he drew his foot across the floor as if he were killing a beetle.

Joe Moran received this menace in submissive silence, closing his eyes and sniffling helplessly.

Chippy strode over to the table, consisting of the side of a packing-box nailed against the wall much like a shelf, and sitting on an empty powder-keg, proceeded to regale himself with the hotchpotch which had seemed unsavory to the sick man's fevered palate.

"Ain't it about time fur them powders?" whined Moran, peevishly.

Chippy tersely committed the powders to Purgatory, and the sick man with them.

To this recommendation Moran entered no demurrer, but mentally resolved that, if he ever got so that he could handle a revolver again, he would "fix" Chippy so that he "would know how it was himself!"

Half an hour later he was roused out of a fitful slumber, and the medicine administered.

That night, when Old-man Crocker came to inquire how his patient was getting on, Chippy stood behind him, and fixed his frowning glance upon the sick man, as if daring him to betray what had passed between them.

CHAPTER II.

PUMPING A DRY WELL.

"I RECKON you're on the mend," said Crocker, hopefully, though his anxious scrutiny belied his words.

"Oh, I'm comin' on," answered Moran, glancing nervously under Crocker's arm at Chippy.

Old-man Crocker noticed this, and whirled round just in time to see Chippy in the act of changing his attitude and the expression of his face.

"What be you monkeyin' around hyar fur?" he demanded. "Cl'ar out o' this; an' when you're wanted, you'll hyear from me."

Chippy went, beginning to regret that he had

treated his helpless victim so cavalierly that morning.

"Look a-hyar, Joe," said Old-man Crocker, drawing confidentially near to Moran's bedside, and seating himself as if for a long chat, "is Chippy doin' the squar' thing by you now?"

"Chippy? He? Oh, yes!" answered the sick man, with nervous precipitancy. "Chippy's all right."

"I'd break him in two, ef he wa'n't!" growled Old-man Crocker, with a scowl that added nothing to the sick man's comfort.

"Oh, Chippy, he's all right," Moran repeated. "He gimme my physic as squar' as a die, an' my grub any amount, an' good, too. Chippy's all right when he wants to be. I'm feelin' a heap better'n I did yistiddy."

"I hope you be," answered Crocker. "I reckoned you was a goner, when I gathered you up out yan. Six-foot Si come mighty nigh puttin' you out to grass, fur a fact."

"Six-foot Si?" repeated Moran, having on the tip of his tongue to correct this error as to the assailants who had so nearly done for him.

Then he bethought him that there was no use in showing any more of his hand than was actually called. So he resumed, meditatively:

"Lem me see! I've hyeared that name some- 'rs. Six-foot Si—Six-foot Si!"

"Oh, come off, pard!—come off the perch! I'm up to all o' this hyar business, ye onderstand."

"Up to what business?"

"I'm a corker on cipherin'!"

Joe Moran blinked at this shot took him between the eyes, but still fought shy.

"Cipherin'? What's that got to do with me? I ain't much on figgers myself. I wish't I was."

"You're a wary bird, you be! Waal, ef you will have it, I'm fly to the leetle game Beth Crawford played on you, an' I know what stake was up. How's that?"

"Beth Crawford?" repeated Moran, still trying to look blank.

"Ta, ta, ta, ta!" interrupted Old-man Crocker, with playful impatience. "I like a lie well stuck to, I do, but a man oder know when he's down. If I've got to take you from the ground up, hyar ye have it."

And telling the points off on his fingers, he put the case deliberately:

"Miss Falmouth an' Beth Crawford is two queens on the same keerd—a double-header, ye onderstand. Beth Crawford is Bob Cady's best girl. Bob Cady was Joe Moran's pardner. Joe Moran knocked his pard out of a neat leetle dockyment what's 'lowed to be worth a mint of any man's money. This hyar leetle dockyment was contracted fur to go to Hank Budlong an' his gang, share an' share alike, but Joe Moran comes the thimble-rig game on him—now ye see it, an' now ye don't see it! Beth Crawford an' Six-foot Si, under the blind of Miss Falmouth an' the Teaser, they scoops Joe Moran in, body an' breeches, an' gits away with the plunder as slick as grease. Then Hank Budlong an' his gang drops in, an' fills Joe Moran full o' lead."

"Oh, you hain't got nothin' to tell me, only one thing."

"An' what's that?" asked Moran, breathless at this stripping of the veil from his secret.

"You tell me what that blind is like, so's I'll know it when I clap eyes on it, an' you give me the run o' the keerds, so's I kin reel it off in square-toed U. S. lingo; an' by the time you air out of this hyar bed, me an' you will have a claim staked out an' a notice posted out yan in the mountains, what'll knock jay-birds out o' Crawford, Budlong & Co."

At a flash Joe Moran saw that as long as he was—or was supposed to be—the repository of the secret of the Lost Mine, Old-man Crocker would have a money interest in seeing that he had the best care he could secure for him; but if he accepted this partnership, and made Crocker independent of him, living or dead, it took no nice balancing of probabilities to satisfy him that the chances were he would be left to die, if indeed he was not ruthlessly hurried out of the world!

Summoning, then, all his craft to his aid, he said, with an air of unsuspicious frankness:

"You've got me dead to rights, an' that's a fact, pard. But you'll allow as no man hain't no call fur to throw up his hand tell he sees as t'other is good fur the pot."

"Oh, that's all right! You play yer hand fur all it's worth. But when I show up everythin' in the deck, then you come down shoutin'."

"The blind you'll spot on sight. It's bits o' brown paper what nobody'd be found dead with, only fur the scratches on 'em hither an' yan—a map an' some writin' what Ole Nick himself would never tumble to. How Bob Cady done it, I'll never tell ye! Lord! I've seen him sweat over that thar thing nights an' Sundays, time out o' mind—a good four year, if a day!"

But here, as he dwelt upon it, the agonized face of his dead partner seemed to start into reality in mid-air before him, and suddenly dropping his jaw, he broke off.

"Yes! yes!" panted Old-man Crocker, drawing nearer to drink in every word, and rubbing his hands with the avidity of a miser who sees a bag of gold just within his reach. "That thar writin'—that's what we're after! How do ye

figger it out when you've got yer two peepers froze on to it solid?"

Joe Moran felt cold chills run up and down his back.

"He's got the eye o' the devil!" he said to himself. "I'll have to handle him with care, or he'll shove me under ground with a rush!"

Gazing into Crocker's eyes as if fascinated by their hungry stare, he answered:

"I reckon I can't jest put you onto the thing so's you could run it yerself without no help."

"Look a-hyar!" cried Old-man Crocker, abruptly, turning pale with a sudden suspicion. "Don't you know how to read that thar thing?"

"Oh, yes!" was Joe Moran's hasty assurance.

"I know how to read it fast enough, ef I only had the thing hyar."

As quickly as it had come, the look of baffled fury that distorted Old-man Crocker's face till Joe Moran's heart stood still, gave place to a grin scarcely more reassuring, as he said, with a sort of cackling laugh:

"Oh, that's all right, of course! An' you'll stow standin' me off with foolishness, an' we'll give ye a mouthful o' whisky to brace ye up, so's ye kin drawer the thing off as good as the ginooine dockyment, an' be hanged to Six-foot Si an' his crowd! Look a-hyar, pard! I've brung along a mite o' paper an' a lead-pencil, an' you kin chalk it down at yer leisure."

"But you hold over me thar, pard—you do, 'pon me soul!" protested Moran, earnestly.

"Oh, yes, I do!" answered Crocker, seconding the sarcasm of his tone with a wink and a toss of his head over his shoulder. "I'm a fool, I be! but I ain't sich a blame fool as to believe that you carried that thar gold mine around loose in yer pocket fur a month, without puttin' it in yer head, so's ef you lost it you'd have it all the same! Oh, no! I ain't sich a got-blamed fool as that!"

"But that's jest what I done, pardner!" pleaded Moran, as if for his life. "You git the cryptogram, an' I'll read it off to ye like a book, but—"

"Cryptogram nothin'!" roared Old-man Crocker, enraged at the very sound of the word, as he began to fear that he was to be treated to nothing but sound, in the place of substance.

"But I had the thing sewed in my coat," declared Moran, "an' I was afeard to take it out tell I knowed I was solid from Budlong. You kin see fur yerself whar they ripped it open. Whar's my coat, anyway?"

"That's safe enough," answered Crocker.

At the very outset, when he had cut the writhing body down from where Budlong and his gang had hanged it, Crocker had noticed the rent garment, and later he had secured it, and given it a thorough overhauling at his leisure in his own shanty.

Now he looked steadily at the trembling wretch before him, and slowly came to the conclusion that he was speaking the truth.

"Waal," he said at last, "we'll drop this hyar fur a spell. But ef you've been lyin' to me, Joe Moran, I'll— But thar!—talk's wind!"

While this unfinished menace was sending a chill through Joe Moran's soul, as when a child stands gazing into a dark room from which some mysterious sound has come, his heart was brought into his throat by an interruption that made even Old-man Crocker start.

A yell of pain and terror, a furious scuffle for a moment, a dull thud as of the fall of some heavy body, a groan, a few rapid footfalls in retreat, and dead silence!

Old-man Crocker sprung up with an oath.

"What's that?" whimpered Moran, with the terror of helplessness.

Not stopping to speculate, Old-man Crocker rushed out of the shanty headlong.

"Who's hyar?" he cried, holding his revolver in readiness for instant use, on the discovery of a suitable target.

There was no answer, and he called:

"Chippy!"

Unbroken silence! Then again, impatiently:

"Chippy!"

Still a third time, with a string of savage oaths that marked a blind, unreasoning fury which did not distinguish between helplessness and willful neglect:

"Chippy! Whar in Cain be you? Why don't ye speak?"

He knew very well that he would find his drudge lying unconscious somewhere about, and proceeded to grope in the darkness till he stumbled upon him.

Picking up the limp body, he bore it into the shanty, quite heedless of the probable effect of this sight upon the sick man.

In an agony of terror which he would not have experienced but that his nerves were so unstrung by illness, Joe Moran started forward, but did not reach a sitting posture before he fell back with a groan, fainting dead away.

At that sight, Old-man Crocker filled the room with sulphurous profanity.

"Knocked him out, I'll be blowed! an' that thar gold mine gone to glory!"

And though, if true, this was the result of his own carelessness, he fairly threw the unconscious Chippy on the floor, and added two or three brutal kicks, which were destined to serve as painful mementoes for many a day.

Then he ran for Saw-bones, to repair the damage, if possible.

Joe Moran was brought round again, the surgeon declaring that he had the constitution of a horse, or he would have been a dead man long before.

When Chippy was restored to consciousness, he gave a rather lame account of himself.

"I was knockin' my heels out thar, waitin' for you to git through, when I hyeared a sound as if somebody was sneakin' around thar by the winder. I went to see who it was, an' the fu'st thing I knowed a cyclone struck me, an' this hyar's the shape it left me in!"

The fact was, he had sought to play eaves-dropper, and had found himself anticipated.

So sudden and terrible had been the onslaught of the spy, in his desperate effort to escape detection, that Chippy had not even caught a glimpse of him.

Old-man Crocker stamped about, swore, threatened, cross-questioned, all to no result.

Chippy knew nothing, and could therefore tell nothing.

"But I'll lay fur 'im!" repeated Crocker, with the glare of murder in his bloodshot eyes.

CHAPTER III.

A STAND-OFF.

ON the following day Dandy Dave "dropped around" to see how Joe Moran was doing.

Chippy, doubly watchful since his misadventure of the night before, saw him, and suspecting his mission, came out and stood on the doorstep to prevent his entrance, if possible.

"Hallo, Chippy! How's yer patient?"

"Oh, he's comin' on toler'ble."

"I reckon I'll go in an' give him the time o' day, anyhow."

"He'd be proud to see ye, Dave. Only the Doc he 'lows as we'd better keep him quiet fur a few days yit. I'll tell him as you asked after him, when he wakes up."

But here Chippy, a clever liar usually, made a false play.

Dandy Dave caught him up instantly.

"Asleep, is he? Waal, then I reckon it won't hurt him jest to look in an' see how he shows up. He looked bad when I seen him last."

"Oh, he ain't asleep yit!" Chippy hastened to interpose, "but he's jest gittin' to sleep. He had a restless night."

"Ef he lies as easy as you do, he ought to be satisfied," said Dandy Dave, brushing by the would-be obstruction without further ceremony.

There was no help for it. Chippy had not the pluck to offer open opposition to the boss of the camp.

"Waal, ef you're bound to see him, I reckon that'll give me a show to git a plug o' tobacker," said Chippy, hitting upon this excuse to go and warn Old-man Crocker.

"Hyar's a chaw fur ye, ef that's what ye want," replied Dave, proffering a piece of plug.

He contracted his eyes shrewdly, in a way that intimated that he saw through his pretext.

"Obleeged," answered Chippy, gnawing off a chew. "But thar's my canteen, too. I've been wantin' to fill it, or git somebody passin' to fill it fur me. Now you're hyar I kin jest step over to the Buckin' Burro—"

"But I'd druther you'd stay jest whar you be," said Dave, slowly. "I hain't no notion o' bein' left with no galoot what's got his skin perforated like a sieve. Ef he should spring a leak, I wouldn't know what to do fur him."

"Oh, he's all right. Thar ain't a mite o' danger."

"All the same, I ain't takin' no chances."

There was nothing to be made in this kind of sparring. Still, Chippy tried another move.

If he could not get away to warn his master, he might prevent any confidential communication by his presence.

"Waal, it ain't no 'count, ef you're skeery," he declared, with an affected laugh. "Come right in, an' you'll see as he's solider'n you'd allow he would be."

But here Dandy Dave objected again.

"I kin find my way in alone," he said. "I was at home hyar before Old-man Crocker shoved his knife up under the ribs of the previous occupant."

He walked in past Chippy, saying, pleasantly:

"You kin take the air fur a spell. Only keep within call."

And he deliberately shut the door behind him.

"Waal, he means business!" declared Chippy, staring blankly at the door. "What's to do, now? The ole man'll peel me all up, ef anythin' comes out o' this hyar."

"I've got to take the chances, one way or the t'other. The door's shut, an' the winder too. I reckon I won't git a better show than this."

Pale as death, and shaking in every limb—for Bloody Run was a place where every man was his own judge, jury and executioner—Chippy started to slip away while Dandy Dave was occupied with Joe Moran.

He had gone scarcely ten paces, glancing back apprehensively over his shoulder at every step, when he suddenly stopped dead still, and threw up his arms with a cry of terrified deprecation,

whirling round so as to face the shanty from which he had been trying to steal away.

No voice had challenged his departure; but through the window he saw Dandy Dave lift his revolver into line, as coldly deliberate as if he were about to shoot at a target.

Chippy was fully convinced that nothing he could now do would stay the messenger of death. A moment, and he would be writhing on the ground in the anguish of a mortal wound.

When instead he saw Dave lower the weapon, satisfied with the effect of his menace, he collapsed with reactionary weakness.

His skin clammy, his mouth dry, his knees fairly knocking together, he staggered back toward the shanty.

Whatever might be in store for him through the wrath of his master, nothing could exceed the peril through which he had just passed.

With a cold, satirical smile, Dandy Dave turned away from the window, satisfied that he could now give his attention to the sick man he had come to see, with little further to fear from the demoralized Chippy.

He found Joe Moran staring at him with mouth agape and eyes round with apprehension. Illness had shaken his nerve, and these little exchanges of civility disturbed him more than usual.

"What's the row?" he demanded, irritably. "Nothin' at all," answered Dave. "Only I lined a cur out yon, an' then it struck me that he wa'n't worth the powder to blow him to kingdom-come. How air you feelin', ole man?" "I'm a-feelin' all right."

He didn't believe that Dandy Dave had sought him from any motives of kindly goodwill.

"Ole-man Crocker is doin' the purty act, an' he's a-doin' it well," pursued Dave, with a satirical smile.

"He's pullin' me out of a hole," answered Moran, "an' that's what nobody else ain't doin'."

"Look a-hyar, Joe! you ain't nobody's fool," declared Dave, with the abrupt assumption of a brisk, business-like air. "You know that this hyar is grub-stakes what Crocker is putting up on you."

"What ef it is?" "Maybe you kin make better terms with a new bidder."

"What terms?" Instead of making a proposal direct, Dandy Dave answered by asking another question.

"Do you reckon as the ole man is 'lowin' to give you a squar' deal?"

"What's the reason he shouldn't be?" "It ain't in his natur'!"

"You'd better tell him so."

"I've got it in me to tell you so, an' leave you to give him the chance to take his change out of it, if you like. I'm givin' you the straight tip, Joe; an' you know it."

"I reckon I've got to play my own hand," said Moran, in a voice which showed that he had gone over this matter already, rather hopelessly.

"Not ef you're achin' fur a pardner," declared Dave.

Joe Moran looked at the speaker as if weighing the sincerity of this overture, and the possibility of his taking advantage of it, if he decided in its favor.

"You've got to take me on trust too," said Dave, with a grin which showed that he appreciated that it might be a difficult choice. "But I reckon thar's a few o' the boys as wouldn't 'low as I'd play hog, an' hand you out o' the back door the minute I got your best."

"Would Crocker do that?"

"You must size him up for yourself."

Joe Moran searched the face of the man who had come to him with this strange proposal.

His life might hang upon the decision of that moment.

The blood ebbed still more completely from his already ghastly face. A cold sweat broke out all over him. Slowly his body was taken possession of by the palsy of sickening dread.

"It's no use!" he gasped presently. "He wouldn't let a grease-spot o' me fall into your hands!"

Dandy Dave smiled in triumph. Already he began to taste the delight of getting the better of his rival where he would feel defeat most keenly.

It was nothing to Dandy Dave what became of the wretch before him, in the struggle. If he could carry his point, well and good. If he failed, he might at least snatch the prey once more out of Old-man Crocker's eager grasp.

"Hark!" he cried, drawing to the sick man's bedside, and bending over him. "The thing is easy as rollin' off a log. All you've got to do—"

But the speaker was interrupted by the sound of some one approaching the shanty at a dead run—some one who, without stopping for anything, hurled himself against the door, and burst it open, with such violence that the impetus of his body carried him clear to the center of the room.

Fortune had favored the miserable Chippy. Tied by the leg with an invisible tether, his wistful gaze was suddenly blessed by the sight

of Old-man Crocker issuing from the Bucking Burro.

Fearing to beckon, he slouched his hat so as to hide his face from the window, and then hung out a flag of distress in the shape of an agonized grimace.

Old-man Crocker needed no further prompting. Already on the alert, he quickly realized that his henchman was acting under restraint.

Rushing to the shanty at the top of his speed, he uttered only a monosyllable as he passed his subordinate.

"Dave?" "You bet!"

The savage oath with which Crocker received this confirmation of his fears, was drowned by the crash of the door as he burst through it.

As has been said, he landed fairly in the middle of the room before he fetched up.

Joe Moran started up in bed with the shock of this abrupt interruption, only to sink back gasping with exhaustion.

If Dandy Dave's nerves thrilled, he disguised it cleverly.

"You don't stop to knock before comin' in?" he observed, coolly.

"Not in my own house!" retorted Old-man Crocker, with a glare of the eyes that had murder in it.

"It would be cheaper, at any rate," laughed Dave, "to lift the latch."

"That jest depends," answered Crocker.

As he crossed the threshold he had drawn his revolver, and now held it at his right thigh, with finger on trigger.

His wolfish eyes ran over Dandy Dave's figure.

Dave wore a nobby short-skirted sack coat, with pockets in the sides. At the sound of nearing footsteps he had merely dropped his hands into these pockets, and turned so as to face the entrance.

He now stood apparently at ease. All his muscles seemed relaxed. There was no trace of menace anywhere. His half smile was one with which any friend might regard another.

Nevertheless Old-man Crocker had every reason to believe that he would be a dead man before he could lift his weapon to the level of his shoulder.

He didn't try the experiment!

Chippy had come to the door prepared to back his master if it came to open warfare, and so to make his own case as good as possible.

"Stood him off ag'in!" he muttered, with secret disgust, as he saw that his principal stopped to parley, instead of mounting his man at once.

If he lost his grip like this, would it pay to continue to play jackal to him?

Chippy began to consider whether it would be possible for him to transfer his allegiance to the better man.

"He hain't no use fur me," was his conclusion, "an' the ole man would lay fur me some dark night, ef he didn't step on my neck in broad daylight!"

Dandy Dave did not "crowd" his antagonist. Satisfied with having "stood him off," he betrayed no consciousness of having scored a point. He only talked pleasantly, as if his visit were a matter of course.

"Well," he said finally to Joe Moran, as coolly as though Crocker were not yet eying him with the murderous alertness of a panther, his revolver hanging at his thigh at full cock, "I'll see you later. Be good to yerself!"

Joe only stared breathlessly, too apprehensive of the issue to reply.

Dandy Dave looked into Old-man Crocker's eyes with a quiet smile, saying, as he set out to pass him on his way to the door:

"Don't throw away no trumps, pard. You ain't ready for me yet."

Crocker turned as Dave passed him, and for a moment measured the broad back of his cool rival as if deliberating whether to put a bullet through it—which he could easily have done.

But Dandy Dave was noted for the nerve with which he bluffed. He always went in for all he was worth. And this time it carried him through scathless.

The fact was, Dandy Dave understood human nature pretty well. Whatever Crocker might have done in the first moment of his fury, had he seen his chance, a "stand-off" made a material change in the situation. It was not likely that he would deliberately shoot his enemy in the back in cold blood.

There are unwritten laws in this wild life which the most conscienceless obey, and a cowardly shot in the back isn't the kind of score a man of Crocker's standing cares to add to his record.

With keen admiration in his glance, Chippy backed away from the door, to allow Dandy Dave to pass.

Crocker, with a suppressed oath, kicked the door to, and then turned upon the shrinking Moran with the glare of murderous suspicion and hatred in his eyes.

"Don't go fur me, pard!" pleaded the wounded man, tremulously. "It wa'n't o' my doin'—you know that."

"Have you sold me out?" demanded Crocker, with a savage oath.

"'Pon me soul, I hain't!"

"What did he want?"

"He only dropped in to ask me how I was comin' on."

"You're a liar!"

"By the soul o' me body, pard!"

"You're a liar, I say!"

Moran began to whimper, helplessly.

"He come hyar fur to cut the dirt from under my feet, curse him!" declared Crocker, confidently. "The only question is, was he hyar long enough fur you to make terms with him."

"He wasn't hyar a minute before you dropped down on us. Ask Chippy."

"I've no questions to ask anybody. You're a lot o' liars all round! But I've a word to say, an' it'll stan' you in hand to hark to it."

"If you shake me," he declared, in a low, hoarse roar of venomous hate, "I'll plant you deep!"

With this menace, he strode from the hut, leaving the shivering wretch behind him almost dead with terror.

"Among the lot of 'em," whimpered Moran, "they'll put me under ground anyway!"

Chippy's knees fairly knocked together, as the tyrant came forth.

"I 'lowed to go fur you, boss," he pleaded, "but he had his gun on me through the window!"

Old-man Crocker only deigned a blank stare as he passed, too much engrossed in his plans for the future to stop for excuses or explanations.

Chippy's heart sunk within him.

"He'll fix me some day, sure!" was the lugubrious conclusion.

Two weeks later Dandy Dave suddenly and without a word of warning to any one disappeared from the camp, and on the following day Old-man Crocker took his departure in a very excited frame of mind.

It was not long before rumor began to ask in whispers what had become of Dandy Dave. Had the old man got away with him at last?

But when, at the expiration of three days Crocker returned even more excited than when he went away, no one presumed to call him to account.

Out of the crowd that he always had at his beck and call he selected a dozen or more, the most villainous and turbulent of even that bloody crew, and these he commanded to make ready to follow him, without telling them whither or wherefore.

They made no nice inquiry. It was enough for them that there was "fun" in prospect, and Crocker promised them not only fun, but money.

He made provisions that indicated a prolonged campaign away from their base of supplies; but they only stipulating for all the whisky they could drink.

A litter was constructed of a blanket stretched between two saplings, with a horse at either end, and into this Joe Moran was bundled with little or no ceremony, Old-man Crocker insisting that he would carry like a kid in its cradle.

The party then set forth, no one but Crocker and Moran knowing that the struggle for the Lost Mine was now renewed in deadly earnest.

CHAPTER IV.

A SWEET PAIR.

How it happened that Billy Boston was striving to master the melancholy measures of a ranter's hymn, we shall presently see.

Whether from want of familiarity with that sort of minstrelsy, or because the jolting rattle of the coach put him out, his execution was about as musical as the howling of a yellow dog that has been fooling around the business end of a wide-awake crab.

Baffled in his pious efforts, he sent his whip-lash trailing out over the backs of his four-in-hand, till its cracker exploded within an inch of the sensitive ears of his off leader—this for no particular reason, but only from the force of habit.

With his foot hard on the brake, he reined in his plunging horses, and when they were quiet again, proceeded to pour forth his soul in the rollicking cadences of his favorite:

"If a body hath any good whis-ki, an' giveth his neighbor none,
He sha'n't have any o' my whis-ki when his whis-ki is gone!"

Oh! won't it be joyful,
Joyful, joyful, joyful,
Oh! won't it be joyful when his whis-ki is gone?"

In this roaring bacchanal he could defy the roughest mountain road and the most ramshackle of coaches to mar a single note in its melodious tide; but, alas! the fates were against him.

He had scarcely got fairly under way, when an unappreciative voice broke in upon his offering to the Muse of Song.

"Dry up thar, you blatherin' calf!"

"What! No! gents, ye don't call me?"

"Waal, you bet yer bottom dollar that's jest what we're up to!"

"Sho', now! I've run this hyar road—"

"That's all right, Johnny! But ef you don't dry up an' come down, you'll run a worse road

nor this hyar—what's all down grade, with a grand bounce at the bottom."

"But, boss, you'll knock my repertation higher'n Gilderoy's kite!"

"Come! come! No monkey business! Up goes yer hands, or you git a skylight in yer mansard!"

"Waal, that *do* sound like business!"

"An' business you bet it is. Spiel!"

"Don't throw away no trumps on me, pardner. I pass, and leave you to play it out with the gents inside."

With a sigh of resignation to the wickedness of the world, Billy Boston rolled his quid into the other cheek, coiled the reins round the brake-handle, and standing up in his seat, elevated his hands above his head.

The road-agent who obstructed his passage, with a carbine at his shoulder and his eye ranging menacingly through its sights, lowered the weapon to his hip, and touched his horse with the spur.

At this moment a head appeared through the window of the coach, and a voice, in the canting whine of the exhorter, demanded:

"Brother Boston, may I ask who this is, that with force and arms—"

"Cheese it, you ole duffer!" interrupted the outlaw, roughly. "We're at your leetle game—takin' up a collection. But the sasser comes before the sarment—you'd orter know that."

The parson wore an old-time white beaver hat, its woolly nap in marked contrast with the sleek surface of the modern silk tile.

A pair of green spectacles, smacking of the midnight oil, hid the expression of his eyes, though he seemed "a mildly mannered man" withal.

A flowing blonde beard, the hairs of which were as fine and straight as the locks that fell about his shoulders, combined with the sallow hue of his skin to give him a gaunt appearance, and when, at the rough command of the robbers, he descended from the coach, this effect was heightened, by a long black sack coat, which hung upon him like a duster.

He carried a weather-beaten umbrella, once black no doubt, its warped ratan ribs making it baggy below the point where it was tied with a shoe-string, while their ends stood "seven ways for Sunday" about the handle.

A well-thumbed Bible under his arm, and a hungry-looking old-fashioned carpet-bag, completed his ministerial get-up.

"Pour not thy vials of wrath on a man of peace!" he exhorted. "If a servant of the Lord is to be fallen upon in the highway, let there be as little violence as consists with the execution of the unholy business."

By this time the men whom the chief had at his back came crowding around the coach, grinning in anticipation of a rare chance for chaffing.

"We owe you one, pop," laughed one of them.

"You've come to drive us out o' the country."

"Yea, verily!" assented Parson Edwards.

"Love is mightier than wrath, and thy calling fleeth before mine. So ever the light banisheth the darkness."

"We don't bear no malice, pard. Every man plays his own hand fur what it's worth."

"He that liveth by the sword shall perish by the sword! A wiser than I hath told ye! Much I fear me, friend, that at the last day you will find that you have been playing a losing game."

"Like as not, boss," replied the fellow, unconcerned. "We all go broke sooner or later, but we have the fun o' chippin' in while the dust holds out."

Meanwhile the chief had thrust his head into the coach, and spied out a very different sort of man from this sundowner.

He had sat in his corner with arms folded and feet crossed on the seat in front of him, and the descent of the road-agents did not seem to have moved him from his attitude of churlish unsociability.

His hat, a soft felt, still remained drawn down over his eyes so as fairly to rest on his nose, and entirely hide the upper part of his face.

The nose was what is called a pug, and beneath it protruded a massive, pugnacious jaw, accented by a pointed, stubby chin-whisker.

That nothing might be wanting to indicate his character, a ragged stump of a cigar was held between his teeth as in a vise.

His scornful indifference called an oath from the robber chief, as he commanded him to come out of the coach, and that without delay.

The fellow obeyed at once, without protest, yet also without the haste that betokens fear.

"Hi! ketch on to this, fellers!" shouted one of the outlaws, as he appeared on the step of the coach. "They have 'em of assorted styles an' sizes."

The last was an allusion to the short, stocky build of Tom Bolan, as contrasted with the long, lanky figure of the Rev. Calvin Edwards.

"The parson takes him around as a holy terror—a warnin' to sinners!" laughed the other.

Tom Bolan scowled at the joker, and retorted:

"Johnny, ef these hyar galoots would give me a fair shake, I'd undertake to make you wish't you'd took warnin' before you chipped in so peart."

The man at whom this challenge was thrown out was of a build that would make most men think twice before inviting him to a personal encounter.

"Waal, now, pard," he replied, promptly, "I reckon you're about my size, an' I've a notion to accommodate you, ef the Cap kin spare the time."

"Money before monkey-business!" was the chief's decision. "We'll see how they pan out first."

"Mighty porely, pard," replied Bolan. "Ef you kin find ary pickin' on me, it'll be a god-send."

"Shell out!" commanded Hank Budlong, for it was no less a person than Joe Moran's swindled confederate.

Bolan coolly lifted the skirt of his coat, as if inviting search.

The outlaws went through his clothes scientifically.

The fruits of this quest were one revolver and twenty rounds of ammunition, all in good condition; one jack-knife, fair; one half plug of tobacco and a broken-stemmed clay pipe, "middlin'"; a flat black bottle containing about a gill of liquor, which the searcher pronounced vile before pouring it down his throat; and, lastly, two dollars and forty-five cents in money.

"Waal, pard," asked Budlong, with a look of disgust at this meager result, "whar's your plunder?"

"Jest what ye see," replied Bolan, unconcernedly.

And he turned round, as if for inspection.

"The duds you've got on?"

"What do you expect, boss? A Sarrytogie trunk? I don't sport nothin' what I can't carry on the inside or the outside o' me."

"Waal, what do you travel on, anyway?"

"Not on his good looks!" put in the fellow who had already moved Bolan to wrath.

"I travels on my muscle!" retorted Bolan, looking at the last speaker significantly.

"You'll have to bolt him, Maddern," bantered one of the outlaws.

A general snail went round, bringing the blood to Maddern's face; but he held his peace, only compressing his lips, and scowling in an ominous way.

Hank Budlong turned his attention to the parson.

"The Rev. Calvin Edwards had leaned his umbrella against a tree, and set his carpet-bag down beside it.

Then he stood erect, running over the leaves of his Bible with seeming nervousness, as he scanned the outlaws over the silver rims of his spectacles.

"Waal, pop!" was the challenge of the outlaw chief, "we'll have to come down on you."

"My toothbrush and comb you will not want, of course," said the parson, plaintively. "And this ancient timepiece belonged to my grandfather. I hope you will leave me that, gentlemen, for its memories."

"Oh, you can't stand us off with that rubbish!" cried the road-agent. "Hyar, what's this? That's what we're after."

And he struck the minister's pocket, so as to make the silver in it jingle.

While this was being turned out, another had found a little board carefully tied up in the corner of a handkerchief, in the carpet-bag.

"Jest ketch on to this, fellers!" shouted he who had brought to light this treasure-trove.

"Say, gents!" here broke in Billy Boston. "That thar's a blasted shame!"

"What's the row with you?" demanded an outlaw, aggressively.

"I ain't squealin' about my own plunder," replied the stage-driver. "But the parson jest made that thar stake a-preachin' to the boys at Bigler's Bottom. It ain't cold in his pocket yit."

"It'll git cold the sooner out of it."

"That's so, me lawd! But all the same I'll tell ye what I'd do, ef I was gay an' gawdy gents like you fellers."

"An' what would you do?"

"I'd give the parson a show—I would so."

"The deuce you would!"

"You bet! You chaps don't want his leetle pickin's. Then what's the reason it wouldn't be a good idee fur to let him give you an old doxoliger, an' pass round the hat fur him, like the boys done at the Bottom? You need prayin' fur as much as ary crowd I ever see, if you only would believe it."

"Believe it?" shouted one who caught on to the idea with eager delight. "Waal, now, pard, we don't believe nothin' else. Thar's lots o' brands to be snatched from the burnin' in this hyar crowd."

"You bet yer sweet life! We're jest sp'ilin' fur it. Stand his nibs up on a stump."

"Yes, yes! Bigler's Bottom be blowed! We're ready to take in a good thing with the best o' that ornery gang. We don't take no back seat fur nothin'!"

"It's the only thing ye kin lay yer hands on as ye won't take!" said Billy Boston, sententially.

At this sally the outlaws laughed all round, and one of their number shouted:

"I'll tell ye what it is, pards! Let the parson spout, an' Maddern have a set-to with the

t'other snoozer; an' ef they give us a good show, we'll pass 'em along without no dockin'."

"An' chip in dollars to Bigler's Bottom's cents!" added he who so scorned the mining-camp named.

This was received with general enthusiasm, and the chief gave his consent.

Parson Edwards was instantly surrounded by a delighted throng, each bent upon showing him the attention due to a popular orator.

"Now, parson, thar ain't no angel chorus in the yawp we're usen to, but jest you cut loose an' make ole Gabril toot."

"Yes, yes! Give us a rale ole-time rakin' over the coals. Rim-rack an' shack the devil's kingdom, an'—"

"Never mind the shingles!"

"If my bumble testimony can aught avail, it will be a grateful privilege, haply that I may garner one stray sheaf for the harvest of righteousness, to put a sickle into this wayside field of wheat."

"Make it barley, boss, or corn. We know more about them."

"If Brother Bolan will participate," said the parson, turning with a polite invitation to the fellow passenger, "we will first sing a hymn."

But that surly individual, only scowled blackly, as he growled:

"That thar ain't in my line, an' I ain't makin' no fool o' myself, ye onderstand."

"Billy Maddern'll make him sing!" suggested one of the crowd, and all yelled with laughter.

Bolan turned an eye upon Maddern from under his wrinkled brow, like a dog on the alert to see if any one dare snatch at his bone.

The parson did his own singing, with some questionable assistance from Billy Boston, who seized the chance for one more whack at the psalm-tune that he had failed to catch from the previous performance at Bigelow's Bottom.

This he followed with an unctuous prayer, and an exhortation of such power that the outlaws went wild with delight.

He spared none of his audience, but the more telling he made his points, the more heartily they assented, commenting freely on his discourse as he went along, and now and then indicating one of their number to whom some particular part of it could be applied with special aptness.

Never was so strange a medley. The boys did full half the talking, using much the same language as did the parson, but mostly in a different connection.

However, the reverend proved that he had lung-power equal to the best, and his fulminations swelled even above their laughter over one another's witticisms.

When he made his climax, the enthusiasm was at such a pitch that he was treated to a ringing cheer, and every hat was tossed into the air in his honor, while crag and canyon resounded with the universal "tigah!"

"Whoop!" yelled one of his most appreciative auditors, "that does us proud! Plank the shekels, gents; an' jest you don't disremember that no lightnin' parson, like this hyar 'un, don't live on no wind puddin'. Step right along hyar! Take a chance, ur take a walk."

The boys responded in the same generous spirit, double-discounting Bigelow's Bottom.

Then Bolan and Maddern stripped to the waist, displaying a muscular development which won exclamations of admiration for both.

The moment the stranger was seen, he found backers, in spite of the natural preference for their own man.

Billy Boston acted as second for Bolan, and after putting up all the money he could find about his clothes, he begged some kindly soul to favor him with a loan, so that he might have the delight of winning, even if he was robbed of his gains the moment after.

The mill that followed was of the liveliest kind; but in the end Maddern failed to come to time. He was a beauty, and knew how to handle himself, but the stranger carried about with him a terrible right. Adopting the modern method, he got in a hot one on his adversary's jugular, before he himself had received enough punishment to spoil his peculiar style of beauty.

When Maddern shook hands in token of goodwill, and acknowledged that he had been a little too previous in waking up the stranger, he was so groggy that he had to be steadied by a friend.

The boys went wild. One in his delight caught Bolan in his arms in a loverlike hug, offering to form a partnership on the spot, Bolan to elect whether he would join the road-agents, or the outlaw should abandon his fellows and cleave to his new pard.

By general consent the winners divided their gains equally with the champion, making a collection that put him in as good case as the parson.

In spite of Bolan's declining the partnership proffered by his enthusiastic admirer, Hank Budlong extended the invitation:

"Ef you ever change yer mind, an' want to go into a payin' business, what's got lots an' slathers o' fun in it besides, come along o' me."

"When I git hard up, maybe I will," replied Bolan, complacently.

There were two mail-bags in the coach, which the outlaws confiscated, and then let it pass on. Billy Boston took this little adventure so light-heartedly, that he was no sooner in command of his outfit again, and the robbers out of sight, than he proceeded to beguile the time with "The Widder Magee."

Under cover of this canticle, in which Billy made up in energy whatever he may have lacked in tenderness, Bolan spoke to his companion with a familiarity which would have made his recent auditors stare.

"Waal, 'Squire, you could make an honest livin' at that, ef you'd only buckle down to it."

The Rev. Calvin Edwards chuckled in a very unprofessional way, as he answered:

"I may fall back on it, Jake, when nothing else pays better."

"But they'd 'a' knocked the spots out o' you, ef they'd ketched on to that thar heirloom."

The parson glanced with a well-satisfied smile at his umbrella, the baggy appearance of which seemed justified by its make and age.

"After finding the money tied in a handkerchief in my carpet-bag, there was little chance of any one thinking it worth while to inspect this old ark," he laughed.

"But ef they had turned out them false whisksers an' the rest, how would you have stood 'em off?"

"I'd have made a clean breast of it. Open confession is good for the soul, you know."

"Done what? You'd 'a' give away our leetle game? The dickens ye would!"

"I should have told them that I was one of the mighty army of the 'Wanted'—a runaway bank-teller, or a boddler of some sort. In all conscience, there's enough of them so that one can take his choice."

"Waal, you're a past master!" ejaculated Bolan, with undisguised admiration for his confederate's shrewd rascality.

And here were a brace of prime scoundrels come to introduce a new element of treachery into the struggle for the Lost Mine.

CHAPTER V. A "CORKER."

OUT in the mountain fastnesses a brush lean-to was built in a semicircle with the open side toward a perpendicular cliff.

In the center a great fire roared up against the face of the rock, filling the interior of the structure with warmth.

Here were assembled a group of men, some lounging in various lazy postures, some walking about, some standing in moody silence.

One who had the air of a leader sat on a rock, gazing meditatively into the fire.

Just outside of the lean-to, two men were busy dressing a deer, hanging from the limb of a tree by its hind legs.

At a little distance, screened from observation as much as possible by the growth of trees, a body of horses were grazing.

Half a mile away, at the mouth of the gulch which served as a robbers' retreat, a solitary sentinel kept watch and ward.

"Waal, boys," said Hank Budlong, after a long pause, "what's to be done?"

"We ain't makin' our salt this way," replied Billy Maddern, kicking a mail-bag as he passed it in his restless walk.

The two bags had been cut open, and their contents lay strewn about, some half-burnt around the edge of the fire.

"How much air you out o' pocket?" demanded Budlong, with an air of resentment which suggested some jealousy of his subordinate.

"I kin pay expenses, ef that was all I was after, playin' pitch-penny, without no show o' gittin' my neck stretched."

"Suppose you go to playin' pitch-penny then."

"I kin do better!"

"What kin you do?"

"Waal," said Maddern, stopping in his walk, and straightening himself up, while he glanced about at his fellow robbers in a way that made cold chills run over Hank Budlong's body, "I, fur one, hain't give over the notion o' gittin' at that thar gold mine."

"An' I reckon," he added slowly, "thar's them as is o' my way o' thinkin'!"

"Ef that's all you've got to crow about," returned Budlong, sneeringly, "you needn't cock your tail in the air as ef you'd struck a lead what nobody ever hear'n tell of before. Do you know of any one what ain't o' your way o' thinkin'?"

"It begins to look a thunderin' sight like it!"

"That's because two burnt holes in a blanket could see further than a blasted leatherhead what don't drop to nothin' what he hain't got his nose ag'in!"

The expression on the faces of the men who listened to this altercation between their leaders began to change, as they pricked up the ears of their attention.

They had shown their sympathy with Billy Maddern, when he spoke of a change of policy. But now they began to suspect that their chief was possibly more subtle than he, after all.

What had he "in the keerds?"

"Boys!" cried Budlong, with the quickness of true generalship seizing upon the moment

when to make a telling point, "who among you is discontent with my lead?"

He sprang to his feet, now all animation where he had been calm indifference, and looked about upon them questioningly.

"Come, out with it! I hate a coward! If anybody has anythin' to say, I'll think all the more of him fur comin' out bold."

One of the oldest of the men spoke for his comrades:

"Drive ahead, boss. We ain't kickin' yit."

"Billy Maddern's a mighty good man," went on Budlong, changing his attitude toward his discontented subordinate with the cleverness of a born diplomat, "but he's inclined to be a leetle too previous. I will say that."

"All I want is business," interposed Maddern, rather sulkily.

He saw that his chief, by one clever stroke, had undone what had cost him several weeks of subtle hinting about.

"You shall have it—all you want, an' more too, perhaps!" promised Budlong.

Then turning to the crowd:

"Boys, I know as well as anybody that this kind o' luck don't pay. But thar air times when the quickest way to git what you're after is to lay low fur a while."

"I don't have to tell you, I hope, that the mine's what I'm after, an' the mine's what I propose to git, an' this hyar road-agent biz is only fur to keep us together so's we kin all be on hand when the time comes to strike."

"Waal, ef Billy Maddern had held his jaw fur five minutes, I'd have out with this very same thing. That's what I was comin' to when he put in so peart."

"What's to be done?" says I; an' I'm ready to answer my own conundrum. This hyar's what's to be done. We want a good man fur to go into Mulligan's Bend and reconnoiter the spy leetle woman what got away so cleverly with Joe Moran. Don't all speak at once, gents! Who's the candidate?"

A dead silence followed this demand.

"Eh! what's the row now?" asked Budlong.

"You've left Six-foot Si out o' the calculation," said one of his followers.

"Waal, that don't prevent you from countin' him in."

"That's what makes the difference."

"Air you all afraid o' him?"

"He's spotted the hull crowd of us, Cap, an' we've had one taste of his metal."

Hank Budlong laughed, but the others looked gloomy.

"Ef he could clap the lot of us, one by one, into the stone jug at Bloody Run," asked the outlaw, referring to a misadventure in which Six-foot Si had got away with Hank Budlong's band almost to the last man, "what's to prevent him from doin' the like at Mulligan's Bend, I want to know?"

"Why, the fact that you're on your guard ag'in him, which the same you wasn't at Bloody Run," answered the robber chief.

"That's all right, boss," returned the other, doggedly, "but, guard or no guard, the man as gits away with Six-foot Si, will have to git up airly in the mornin', an' don't ye furgit it!"

"Waal," declared Budlong, "the dockymint as shows the way to the Lost Mine is in Mulligan's Bend, an' ef we want to git it, we've got to go to Mulligan's Bend after it. Ain't thar a man in this crowd what's got the gall to try his luck?"

No one responded to this call.

It was plain that those who had passed through Six-foot Si's hands once had had all they wanted of him, and the rest were willing to take the experience of their fellows.

"We'll git up a disguise, an' take the night fur it," suggested Budlong.

Still no one volunteered.

"Billy Maddern ain't so keen as he was!" sneered the chief.

"I'm standin' my chance with the rest," answered Maddern, sullenly.

"But the rest ain't takin' no chances," laughed Budlong. "That leaves you a mighty light resk."

"Make it an even thing, an' ef the lot falls to me, you bet I'll go!"

"You ain't no friendly feelin's fur Six-foot Si!"

"I ain't no fool! He's a bad man to handle, I'm free to confess."

"Waal, gents, what is it? A lottery?"

Although it was plain that they had no great relish for it, they could not well back down from one chance in twenty of meeting the redoubtable Six-foot Si.

A rumbling murmur of assent signified their willingness to stand so much.

Hank Budlong got up, and going outside the lean-to, gathered a lot of pebbles in his hat.

"Waal, gents," he said, returning, shaking the hat so that its contents rattled, "thar's one white pebble hyar among a lot o' brown ones. Let's see who gits the lucky stone! Every man turns his back, puts his hand behind him, an' draws out one. Step up, gents!"

And now came a spectacle which showed how men differ in their calculations.

Probably not one present believed that the chances were exactly equal, so that it was a

matter of perfect indifference in what order they drew their lots.

One argued that it wasn't likely that the very first stone drawn out would be the white one, and that with the drawing out of every brown stone, the chance of getting the white one would increase.

He, then, was eager to draw first.

But another said to himself that it was none the less unlikely that the "lucky stone," as Hank Budlong satirically called it, would be left for the very last, and that when it was once drawn, those who remained would have stood no chance at all.

He, therefore, was anxious to hang back.

The first man drew a brown stone, and the yell with which he tossed his hat into the air showed the relief he felt at his good fortune.

The others looked at him enviously, and one growled out that he was always a lucky dog.

"Nonsense!" laughed the fellow. "I've drawered a blank! What's the matter with ye?"

The second and third men drew brown stones, and there was a rush to get in with the run of luck, as they said.

But when the stones were half drawn out, there came a dead pause. Every man left shrunk back.

"Go in, fellers! Don't be barshful!" cried one who had already secured his release.

"Yes, yes!" urged another. "Why stick back in yer misery? You'll feel better when the plunge is once over, an' you know it's some other poor devil as is to be stuck."

"Hold on, gents!" deprecated one who was yet "in his misery." "It's all well enough fur you to crow as is cl'ar; but half the stones is out, an' we on the last half stand twice the resk that you chaps did on the first half."

"Our good luck, an' your misfortune!" laughed the first speaker. "You'd orter been in with the leadin' crowd."

"We couldn't all be first, Sam."

"Oh, yes! We drop to you. You cusses was hangin' back to give us the chance to drawer it out, an' let you go scot-free; an' now you're pullin' long faces because that leetle game didn't go through. You can't eat yer cake an' keep it, Jim."

As no one questioned this reasoning, those who were left began to curse their luck for hanging back, and to resolve to be in with the first if such an occasion ever arose again.

But "badgering" was the spur that brought them one by one "to the scratch." When a man's name was called out, and those who were free began to laugh at him, he would stiffen up, and go forward with profane protestations of his undaunted courage.

When the lot finally fell to Jimmy Kenny, a wild shout of laughter went up, while the unfortunate groaned in undisguised bitterness of soul.

"Waal, I am a dog fur luck! That strappin' cuss rode me fur a burro ten—yes, twenty mile, ef a step; an' now I reckon he'll finish me off when he ketches me ag'in!"

All knew how Six-foot Si had captured Jimmy, and, being wounded, had forced his prisoner to carry him on his back to a place of security for himself and of imprisonment for his human burro.

It was now generally conceded that this was hard luck, and that Si would probably "bore" him, or give him up to Judge Lynch to be fitted with a patent neck-tie, on catching him again at his tricks.

However, upon Jimmy's demanding:

"Ef you're so sorry fur me, why in Cain don't some o' ye offer to go in my place?"

No one showed any disposition to give his sympathy this practical turn.

"Nonsense!" laughed Hank Budlong. "The more resk, the more careful you'll be. It'll suit us best not to have you ketched."

So, when they had rigged him out in a disguise that made him look like a half-starved prospector just coming in after an unsuccessful hunt, Jimmy betook himself, as lugubrious as any pilgrim with pebbles in his shoes, on his ticklish mission.

Once in for it, he was not a bad actor, and entering Mulligan's Bend after nightfall, he went boldly to the worst den in the place, and threw down in a corner his outfit of pick and pan and camp plunder, with the air of a man who was glad of a chance to rest.

It was not difficult to get into conversation with a man who was glad to detail the news, since he professed to have been away from the haunts of men "for a month o' Sundays."

The "great doin's" which had kept Mulligan's Bend and the neighboring camp of Coyote in a state of intense excitement for the past few weeks furnished as congenial a theme as could have been desired, and it was detailed to him down to the most minute circumstance.

When he had pumped his talkative informant dry, he set out to reconnoiter on his own hook, and was prowling about in the neighborhood of a certain shanty in the outskirts of the camp, when he heard a step just behind him.

He had only time to seize his revolver, when a hand of iron closed about his wrist.

He writhed round, to find a man of gigantic

proportions looming black in the darkness over him.

With a sense of suffocation he tried to throw the other off the track.

"Hold on, pard! It won't pay you to hold me up. I'm jest in with holes in both pockets, an' a cave in my bread-basket."

"Jimmy," asked the other, coolly, "didn't you git enough ridin' the last time I had you in a hopple?"

"Oh, Lord!" groaned the unhappy spy. "What is it this time, boss? Go as easy as you kin!"

"I don't want nothin' of you," said the captor. "You toddle back whar you come from, an' tell Hank Budlong, fur me, ef he's got more men than he knows what to do with, I'll agree to hang 'em up to dry as fast as he sends 'em to me. Now you git!"

And releasing his prisoner, the speaker sped him on his way with a kick that was something to keep as a painful memory.

Thanking his lucky stars for his escape on such easy terms, Jimmy Kenny set out forthwith, not stopping to go for the "traps" with which he had entered the camp.

On his way back to the outlaws' retreat, he once thought that he heard a footstep following him, but upon stopping to look about and listen, he concluded that it was but a phantom conjured up by his fears.

Nevertheless he hurried on with nervous haste, glad when he had passed the sentry safely.

That unhappy individual was industriously cursing the sharp night air of October, and envying his comrades in the cosy lean-to.

But it was soon made "warm" enough for him even where he was.

Feeling that his watch was a needless hardship, since there was no one, as he supposed, to take the trouble to surprise the camp, he was walking up and down a short beat, to keep himself warm, along the path leading into the gulch.

But out in the darkness a shadowy figure which had followed Jimmy Kenny with only one accidental self-betrayal, was creeping nearer and nearer at every turn of the incautious sentinel.

As he walked up the path, the skulker would take a few noiseless steps forward, and stand perfectly still as he turned and came down again.

So he reached the very spot where the sentry finished the lower end of his beat.

He stood behind a tree-trunk, so that the outlaw approached near enough to have touched him, if he had known of his vicinity.

He stopped a moment, so close that the skulker fairly held his breath.

Then, with a discontented oath he turned to walk up the path.

A bound, and he was in the grip of a man with the strength and tenacity of a bulldog!

A hand of iron gripped his throat, and he was tripped and thrown heavily to the ground.

"Cheese it, pard!" muttered a voice in his ear. "I don't want no yelp out o' you, unless you air tired o' this hyar life."

"Go easy, boss!" gasped the prisoner, when the grip on his throat was relaxed sufficiently to allow him to speak.

"You cave?"

"You bet!"

"No tricks!"

"Squar' as a die!"

"I'm alone."

"I hope you be, boss."

"You may sw'ar to it ef I say so."

"I hain't no money to lose on it, boss. But it's all the same to me."

"I've got you?"

"Solid!"

"Waal, I can't pocket the camp."

"Not ef you're alone, boss."

"I've told you I was."

"I hope you wa'n't a-lyin'."

This was said so pathetically that the captor chuckled with amusement.

"What be you 'lowin' fur to do with me?" asked the prisoner, feeling the other disarming him.

"I'm goin' to march you up to the captain's office."

"Judge Lynch, Cap? I hain't done nothin' to you!"

"No. I propose to take you to yer own chief."

"Air you a-goin' into camp—you alone?"

"Bet yer life!"

"But you ain't one of our crowd."

"I should hope not, cully!"

"Who be you, then?"

"Never you mind. Git up. March ahead of me. Ef you care anythin' about your mother's son, keep step to my countin' time."

"Boss," pleaded the sentinel, "Hank'll have me shot fur gittin' ketched like this."

"That's your hard luck. March!"

Helpless, the prisoner set out, feeling that his captor kept step not more than a pace in his rear.

So they marched fairly into the presence of the astonished outlaws, who were listening to Jimmy Kenny's account of his adventure.

"Eh! What's this?" cried Hank Budlong, leaping excitedly to his feet.

"Your sarvant, Cap!"

And in amazement they stared at Tom Bolan, who stood bowing to them, sarcastically, hat in hand.

"Waal!" cried Hank Budlong, drawing a deep breath of relief, "you're a corker, an' no mistake!"

CHAPTER VI.

A BASHFUL MAN.

"Hi thar, Daddy Longlegs!"

"What's gone with you, little Skeezicks?"

"Skeezicks yerself, you ole liberty-pole!"

"Haw! haw! haw! The young 'uns got ye thar, Si."

"That jaw o' his'n is hung on a loose hinge, an' that's a fact."

"Maybe you don't like the style o' that jaw," suggested the boy whose saucy hail opens this chapter.

He was of the type which in a city is call a street Arab—a ragged little urchin, in a shirt made of a gunny-bag, and a man's trousers rolled up at the bottoms and suspended by a single rope gallows over one shoulder.

He stood on the bank of a mountain run, watching a party of miners at work in the water, building a coffer-dam.

The man he addressed was a good-natured blonde giant.

Not that Six-foot Si was so inordinately tall; for men who stand six feet in their stockings, as he did, are to be found almost anywhere.

But he was of such a build as to give one the impression of tremendous strength and panther-like activity; while a certain upright carriage of the head and a directness of gaze seemed to indicate indomitable courage lurking behind a mask of easy good-nature.

He was a giant in power, even more than in size.

"It ain't the jaw, Gil," he said, with a vein of indulgent kindness, almost affection, in his voice.

"What is it, then?" interrupted the boy, proof against any such softening influence.

"It's the ornery creak o' the hinges, when you let it swing in the wind."

"Maybe you'd like to oil up them hinges; an' maybe you're too blame stingy to gimme a pull at that thar leetle black bottle o' yours."

"Jest hark to the sass o' him, will ye?" cried one of the miners, going off in a burst of hoarse laughter.

"He takes to the bottle like mother's-milk," added another.

"It's us galoots, what sets him the example, as 'll have to answer fur him," said Six-foot Si, gravely.

"Aw my!" drawled the urchin, sarcastically, quick to resent anything like "preaching."

"Pass around the sasser, will yer, fur Parson Purty-mouth!"

The men, who made no nice discrimination between insolence and wit, laughed again.

Six-foot Si smiled indulgently.

"The kid's peart, an' that's a fact," he said to his comrades.

Then addressing the boy:

"Did you come all the way down hyar jest fur the fun o' shootin' off yer mouth at me?"

"No, I didn't. I reckon I kin put in my time whar it'll pay better than wastin' wind on the like o' you."

"What do ye want, then?"

"It ain't what I want. It's what the lady wants."

"The which?" asked Six-foot Si, with a sudden change of tone, while a dash of color appeared in his weather-bronzed cheeks.

With a quick, nervous glance out of the corner of his eye, he scanned his comrades, as if dreading a smile of ridicule.

They suddenly stopped laughing, and exchanged covert glances; then waited expectantly.

"It's Miss Crawford, as is pinin'—"

"Hold on, chicken!"

Six-foot Si's interruption was short, sharp, peremptory, though he did not raise his voice angrily.

The blood ebbed from his face and he straightened up, looking at his tormentor with a stern displeasure that was more forcible than profane reproof would have been.

"Chaff me as much as ye like," he said, "but draw the line—"

"I tell ye, she sent me!" urged the boy, beginning to shake—not in his shoes, for he had none, but in his bare feet, if the expression is allowable.

"Sent ye?" repeated Si, in astonishment.

"O' course she did."

"What fur?"

"To tell you as she wants to see ye."

Now a crimson wave surged to the man's temples.

"Ye don't say!" he exclaimed, instantly starting to wade ashore.

"Oh, ye needn't be in such a hurry," cried the lad, recovering some of his wonted insolence.

"Air you guyin' me?" thundered Si, stopping short.

"No, I ain't," protested Gil.

"Look out, thar, kid! I don't want no foolishness out o' you!"

"I'm a-givin' of it to ye straight."

"Waal, let's have it, then."

"Miss Crawford, she say, ef I see you anywhar, I was to tell you as she's wantin' to see you up to her shanty, when you happen along that way."

"Any time'll do," added the urchin, in his "fresh" way.

"I won't never have no more time than I've got now," muttered Six-foot Si, continuing to wade to the shore.

"An' she give me two bits!" cried Gil, suddenly producing the coin from his raglan, flippin' it into the air, catching it as it descended, and plunging it again out of sight, as a dog snaps at a bit of meat that is thrown to him.

"An' you hain't got the gall to gimme nothin'!"

"So you take toll at both ends, you young scalawag?" cried Six-foot Si, trying to appear at his ease, though the truth was he was too much embarrassed to look at his comrades.

"When I kin git it," admitted Gil, unblushingly.

"Waal, you kin git it now," said Si, tossing him a coin.

"My eye! A hull dollar?" exclaimed the boy, opening his eyes with delight. "Waal, boss, I'll bring ye the change—next year."

And diving into his trousers pocket with his prize, he darted away up the gulch as fast as his legs could carry him.

Six-foot Si followed at a pace that betrayed his agitation more clearly than he was aware.

One of the men thrust his tongue into his cheek, went through a silent pantomime of laughter, and turned again to his work.

A young girl with her first love-letter could not have been in a more agitated frame of mind than was this burly fellow, who would have looked down the bore of an enemy's revolver without blinking.

"I'm in a purty fix fur to go callin' on a lady!" he said to himself, scanning his person with disapproval. "Reckon, now, I'd better git Wing Lee to rake my topknot into visitin' shape; an' I'll have to shake these duds as if they was full o' tarantlers."

"She's wantin' to see me. What'll the boys think?"

And he blushed again, like a school-boy.

At a Jew dealer's he procured a complete outfit, from top to toe, and then put himself in the hands of a smiling Celestial.

It was lucky for him that John Chinaman was enough of an artist, in his way, not to tamper with the Jove-like locks and beard that fell to his shoulders and over his breast, save with such kindly service as the comb and brush would afford.

When he presented himself hat in hand at the door of Beth Crawford's shanty, the girl could scarcely repress a smile at his appearance.

Yet she could not withhold her admiration, and she would have been more or less than woman not to have felt flattered.

What if his flaming red shirt showed that his taste in dress had been affected by the splendor of the fire laddie? What if his spick and span new garments, that took so unkindly to the lines of his figure, had the odor of a freshly-opened bale of ready-made clothing?

Here was as magnificent a specimen of physical manhood as ever stood abashed under the eye of beauty; and she knew that all this display was in her honor.

"Oh!" she exclaimed, at sight of him, "I did not mean to take you from your work."

"Don't mention it, ma'am!" he protested, bowing low before her.

"You are very kind," she murmured. "Pray come in, now that you are here."

And she held the door open for him, politely.

He looked in and saw a floor so clean that he was afraid to step on it.

Before the door was spread a coffee-sack, to serve as a mat. But this too was as yet unsoiled. So, after glancing about with indecision, he stepped aside and wiped his feet carefully on a chance tuft of bunch grass that grew near.

Then he entered the house, stepping gingerly, and saying, as he passed his hostess:

"I'm obleeged to ye, ma'am!"

She set a chair for him, and offered to take his hat.

But he put it down beside him, protesting:

"Don't trouble yerself, ma'am! It'll do right hyar. I hang it up mostly on the floor, at home."

He scarcely dared to glance at her, so did her beauty set his heart to rioting.

But she was well worth looking at, and we need not be so diffident.

Contrasting with his blonde hair and blue eyes, hers were jet black. The dead white of her complexion was increased by recent illness, but her lips were beginning to recover their wonted scarlet.

Her dress, in good taste and neat as was everything about her, adorned as fine a figure as ever won an artist's eye or lover's heart.

Her face of marked intelligence, had a somewhat stern set. Yet was it womanly.

And now she began, hesitatingly:

"I have sent for you, perhaps because I owe you so much already."

"You do me proud, ma'am, to lay your commands on me!" replied Six-foot Si, earnestly.

"I can never repay you—"

"Ef you don't want to hurt my feelin's, ma'am, you'll drop it right thar! What little I kin do fur you, I hope you'll take as kindly as it's offered."

"But if you approve of my present plans, and will consent to help me, it will take you so long from your own affairs that we shall have to look upon it in the light of a business arrangement."

"We kin settle that any time, ef you'll be so good as to state how I kin sarve you."

"Well, then, I have been thinking that I need a change in life. If I continue moping here, I shall never regain my old health and strength. Look here."

She held out her hand.

"It never shook like that before."

Into Six-foot Si's eyes came a look of troubled anxiety.

"What do you propose to do?" was all he asked, however.

"To find an object in life, and set myself about it. What I need is work."

"Ef money will—"

But he stopped short, his face aflame.

There could be no doubt as to the offer he had been on the point of making, but the girl passed it by unheeded.

"I care nothing for money for its own sake," she said, "but I see in it a means to the happiness of one dear to me, and that makes it worth seeking."

"If you will bear with me a moment, I will tell you about myself, or rather about the one who is all that is left to me to care for."

"More than a thousand miles from here—back in the States, as you say—I have a sister and two brothers. The boys are manly fellows, young as they are, and able to make their ways in the world; but the girl is like a sensitive plant, made for the warmth and sunshine of prosperity."

"We all suffered so from the poverty that followed the death of our father, that she found her only escape from the miseries of our lot in dreams of wealth and luxury."

"A recent inheritance has given her enough to live upon in economical comfort; but I have been looking over this cipher, and it has occurred to me that if the mine could be got possession of, it would yield gold enough to realize her wildest fancy."

"Besides, my Robert gave years of cheerless toil, and in the end his life, for this; and it seems as if it would be slighting his memory to let it all go for nothing."

As she spoke, she drew from her bosom a neat piece of white paper, infolding a lot of scraps of coarse brown paper that had been carefully pasted together, and spread them out on the table.

"An' you're wantin' me to go fur that mine?" said Six-foot Si, while she was thus employed. "I'll start as soon as I kin git the men together. It's a mite risky, an' one man alone wouldn't stand no show."

He spoke as quietly and promptly as if she had asked him to step across the street on the simplest errand.

The girl looked up in surprise, and then flushed slightly.

"I intend to go myself," she said. "I wish you to accompany me."

"You!" cried Six-foot Si, in sudden dismay.

"Certainly," replied Beth.

"That thar won't do, nohow!" declared Si, positively, shaking his head. "You'd never come out of it alive."

"Why? What is the especial danger?"

Six-foot Si was plainly disconcerted by the directness of her gaze.

"Waal, ma'am," he answered, fidgeting, and avoiding her eye, "you must know as goin' off in the wilderness, like that, ain't no game fur no women folks, nobow."

"I am not so helpless as you imagine," urged Beth. "I am used to active, out-door life, and—"

"It ain't so much that, ma'am. I 'low as you'r nervy, an' all that."

"What is it, then?"

"Waal, ye see, when ye cut off yer base o' supplies, like this hyar, the grub will run short, now an' ag'in; an' it takes a man with a strong stomach, as is used to sich pinchin', fur to pull through."

"But I shall fare no worse than the rest—"

"Not so bad, ma'am, as long as thar was a mite fur to nibble. But thar's the chance o' gittin' snowed up, along o' t'other. These hyar mountains is beastly, an' that's a fact."

"I think I could endure the cold, too. At any rate, I am fully determined to undertake it."

"I hope ye won't stand to that, ma'am!"

"If that is all—"

"Thar's Injuns. Ye have to count them in always."

"Fortunately, they have had whipping enough lately to keep them quiet for some time."

"Ye can't most always sometimes tell!"

"I'll risk it."

Six-foot Si looked at her appealingly. Even a duller penetration than hers might have detected that there was something more on his mind.

"Well," she said, "out with it!"

"I was 'lowin'," answered Si, fumbling with his hat, "as how, ef it got winded about what you was up to, thar's lots o' low-down scalawags what wouldn't ask nothin' better'n to lay fur that thar cryptogram. Ye see, everybody 'lows as thar's a heap in it."

The girl looked at him searchingly.

"This is what you have been keeping back," she said, slowly. "Why?"

"Keepin' back?" repeated Six-foot Si, trying to look surprised.

"Do you know of any one in particular who is likely to make trouble of this kind?"

"Ye needn't take on, ma'am, about that thar," was Si's assurance. "Nobody wouldn't stand no show fur disturbin' you in this hyar camp—"

"I am not afraid," said Beth, her eyes beginning to snap with a fire that showed she was one who would fight for her rights. "But what do you know? You certainly suspect something."

"Waal, ma'am, ef you must have it, thar's them scalawags as Moran euchered out o' their plunder. I reckon they're o' the kind what don't let go easy, an' ef they ketched you out in the mountains, they wouldn't ask nothin' better'n the chance to salt ye fur all ye was worth."

"Have you seen any signs of them?"

"To be honest with ye, I have so."

"Prowling about here in Mulligan's Bend?"

"Waal, I did spot one o' 'em. He was in purty good shape; but I dropped to his blind on sight."

"He was disguised?"

"Yes."

"And what did you do about it?"

"I sent word to Hank Budlong as how, ef he 'lowed to have more men than he knowed what to do with, Mulligan's Bend would bury 'em, free, gratis, fur nothin'."

The girl's eyes flashed.

"If it is to be a fight," she said, "the sooner we begin the sooner we will be through with it. Neither Hank Budlong, nor any one else, shall frighten me from my purpose."

"What remains to tell you is that I intend to adopt a disguise."

She hesitated. The color deepened in her face. Then determinedly she went on:

"It will add to my danger, and be an inconvenience in many ways, to retain my character as a woman. I shall therefore don the dress of a man."

"Ma'am!" cried Six-foot Si, starting to his feet, "ye don't mean it?"

"I do mean it," answered Beth.

Then, altering her tone:

"I have thought this matter all over. I believe that, with your assistance, and with what protection you can afford me, it can be done successfully. I believe you are an honorable man, and so do not hesitate to trust you with my secret. I shall be known to no one but you."

She extended her hand.

Six-foot Si said, as if to himself:

"What is to be will be!"

Then, in a deeply reverential tone, as he bent over her hand:

"May God deal with me as I deal with you!"

CHAPTER VII.

A SNAKE IN THE GRASS.

MULLIGAN'S BEND was in a state of excitement which would have suggested to an outsider nothing less momentous in prospect than a Fourth of July celebration.

A new "gospel sharp," and one who promised to be a "screamer," had struck the camp.

The day being Sunday, he was to hold a meeting that afternoon in the open space before the Bucking Burro, and everybody was eager to secure a position from which he could witness the "doin's" without being cut off from his base of supplies—the bar.

The meeting was a great success, the parson's unctuous eloquence having the same effect at the Bend that it had had upon the men of Bigelow's Bottom and Hank Budlong's road-agent band.

While in full course, however, the parson's voice suddenly faltered, and for a moment he quite lost the thread of his discourse.

Luckily for him, the green glasses he wore hid the fixed stare of his eyes.

Since his arrival he had been on the lookout for some one, and throughout the meeting he had carefully scanned the crowd, so that not a face of man or woman should escape him.

And now he had suddenly espied the person of whom he was in search.

It was a woman, who was approaching with a grace of carriage at once simple and unaffected, and yet regal with an indescribable air of gentle dignity.

Her face was pale, as with illness or grief, yet

beautiful with a regularity of form that time could not mar.

Her eyes, clouded by sadness, had their charm only mellowed, not dimmed; while her mouth, now pathetic with tender melancholy, could not fail to suggest the sweetness of the smile such lips must know in happier moments.

She was dressed in extreme simplicity, even plainness; yet an air of dainty neatness invested her which made one feel that, calico or satin, whatever she chose, received its character from the wearer.

This was Beth Crawford, only a farmer's daughter, where are recognized no distinctions save those which nature gives.

At her side, with an air of respectful deference which would have made a less grandly proportioned man seem awkward, walked Six-foot Si.

Here, too, was a man of the people, who bore a patent of royalty that no monarch could have conferred.

The West, which breeds men of kingly stature and bearing, has no nobler son than the hero of Mulligan's Bend.

At sight of this pair, Parson Edwards's heart leaped into his throat in response to the beauty of one, while a moment later a cloud of blood seemed to float before his eyes as they fixed upon the other a stare of deadly hatred.

This surge of emotion was but a moment in passing. Then he recovered himself, and went on in his exhortation, with no perceptible change save that his voice became more unctuous and nasal.

If he was seeking to hide his identity, he succeeded most admirably, for no one would have detected any resemblance between his present ranting whine and the voice in which he had spoken familiarly to Tom Bolan.

After the meeting, Beth Crawford and her escort strolled leisurely out of the mining-camp, following a path which meandered in and out with the course of the river.

It was as picturesque a walk as ever lover wished might lead on and on forever, the stream leaping in a thousand silver cascades from rock to rock.

It seemed to seek out natural bowers of evergreen, where one might hide away from all the world save only one—and that one all the world, and more!

That Six-foot Si was deeply affected by this blissful seclusion, would have been apparent to one versed in the inarticulate language of the voice.

But that alone betrayed him. By constant watchfulness he commanded the expression of his face.

As for the woman, walking with her eyes on the ground, she seemed too deeply absorbed in something else to notice her surroundings.

In another direction the camp was left behind by a man whose breast was a smoldering volcano of the fiercest of all the passions.

When out of hearing, the pent fires burst forth in a lava tide of speech all out of keeping with the garb he wore.

In all ages men have cursed more fervently than they blessed, but the raging of this man's hatred was something to curdle the blood of the hardiest.

Once clear of the camp, he shaped his course so as to approach the path along which Beth Crawford and Six-foot Si were slowly strolling.

As he skulked from covert to covert, striving to catch sight of them without betraying himself, he clinched his hands and ground his teeth, and his eyes rolled with the glare of a wild beast.

Gaining upon their loitering gait, he was first to reach a point where a break in the trees afforded a prospect of grandeur with which the American Wonderland challenges the world.

Here were rocks in abundance to sit upon, but one boulder in particular was of a conformation which seemed designed to invite the climber to rest while viewing the sublime panorama spread out before and below him.

This natural seat bore marks of occupancy, and there were other signs around which showed that this was a spot of not infrequent resort.

"This must be their destination," said Parson Edwards to himself. "If I could only find a place of hiding within earshot!"

The deep base of Six-foot Si's voice, rising distinct from the swish of the water in the otherwise still air of the mountain solitude, warned him that he had not a moment to lose if he would escape detection.

Glancing hastily about, he passed on up the path, and having made his way round a crag and through a clump of evergreens, he came upon just what was suited to his needs.

Beside the path was a patch of greensward upon which he instantly cast himself, spreading his handkerchief on the grass to receive his head, and putting his hat over his face.

Here he was hidden from any one who stopped at the point below, and if they came on, they would find him lying apparently asleep.

Beth and Si stopped where he had supposed they would, and after a moment's embarrassed silence, Si said:

"I reckon you're bound to undertake this thing?"

"Yes," she answered, firmly.

"If I was to go alone," he pursued, after a pause, "I hope you will allow as I wouldn't put in so much in the shape o' talk; but if you're to be in for a share o' the risk, have you stopped to reckon whether it's like to pay? Thar's nothin' so oncertain as prospectin'. You 'low you've struck a million, an' in two days the thing peters out, and before you know it you're knockin' about with yer hands in yer pockets huntin' fur grub-stakes."

"There is undoubtedly some risk of failure," she replied, "But I think I have a fair prospect to go upon. In Robert's shanty I found part of a letter written to me four years ago, when he first came into possession of the cryptogram. It gives an account of how he came by it, and what he thought of its value. But it seems that he thought better about raising my hopes on the uncertainty of his being able to make out the cipher, and preserved that part of the letter only for the sake of the narrative, in the event of his success."

Six-foot Si waited quietly for her to communicate so much of the letter, if any, as she saw fit.

"He found one of the discoverers of the mine wounded and at the point of starvation, and nursed him so faithfully that in his gratitude the man promised to share his good fortune with Robert, if he recovered, and to give him the key to the cipher and all of his rights, if he died. He died unexpectedly in his sleep, so that he had no opportunity to disclose the cipher, but he had previously told Robert that the mine had been sufficiently worked to prove its immense value. Forced to fly the country to escape massacre, the party cached the bulk of the gold already dug, and this awaited any one who held the secret, even if no more was found."

"A party," repeated Si. "And that was four years ago. More'n likely the others have cleaned the thing up long before this."

"One was shot at the beginning of their retreat; one went insane with hardship, and leaped to his death over a cliff; one lay dead beside the last survivor when Robert found them."

Six-foot Si gave a quick start, and asked abruptly:

"Was he wounded?"

"Robert's friend?" asked Beth, with a simplicity which showed that she did not notice Si's manner.

"No—no! The t'other one—the one that was dead," stammered Si, in confusion.

"I don't know."

"Of course ye don't. How should you? It was mighty rough, dyin' o'—o' starvation, out thar alone by themselves, the two of 'em. But that's a thing as happens in these hyar mountains. I warned ye of it, yistiddy."

Si spoke with an eagerness and volubility which showed his relief at having, undetected, got his foot out of the snare into which he had set it.

He had spared Beth a shock by hiding the thought that shot through his brain like a flash of lightning.

"Queer, all of 'em should die off so, leavin' it convenient fur one. When men git a good thing, an' thar's too many of 'em standin' around in the way, they will shove 'em out now an' ag'in. But I'm a fool to set her to thinkin' such like, when she'd never drop ef I let her alone. What difference does it make now, anyway? She might as well have the dust in peace, ef she kin git it."

Another pause ensued. He started to speak three or four times before he finally broke silence. Then he spoke hesitatingly, as if choosing his words and feeling his way.

"I reckon you've settled in yer own mind jest how you're goin' to carry the thing through. Thar's always leetle odds an' ends as one is likely to furgit."

"Yes," answered Beth. "I look to you to get me a suit of male attire. I will then slip away from the camp, change my dress out in the mountains, and make my appearance in another place in my new character. Meanwhile you can secure what men you think necessary, and on your joining me we will set out immediately."

"Thar's leetle things," repeated Si, resuming his former train of thought after having politely heard her out, "what a woman, bein' as she ain't usen to none sich, would most likely overlook."

He stroked his beard in such embarrassment that Beth helped him on.

"What, for instance?" she asked, in a brisk business-like way, as if she did not share or perceive his delicacy.

"Waal, thar's yer ha'r," he answered, crimsoning to the roots of his own. "That's a dead give-away."

"That objection can be very speedily disposed of," replied Beth, with a display of determination which showed that she was far from indifferent to the sacrifice of her crown of loveliness. "I shall cut it off!"

"Oh, no! That 'ud be a blasted shame! I—I beg yer pardon, ma'am!"

The impulsiveness of Six-foot Si's protest was only equal in significance to the abjectness of his apology.

"I hope," he continued, floundering wretchedly, "that you won't lay it up ag'in' me for lettin' slip a word as should never be spoke in your presence. But the thing took me on a sudden, jest whar I—"

He came to a dead halt, with his mouth open. His love for her was so close to his lips all the while, that he could scarcely speak without blundering into some confession of it.

The thought of telling her bluntly that the proposal to sacrifice her hair struck him "whar he lived," took his breath away.

She would not have been a woman if this language of the heart had been unintelligible to her. She frowned, and then her face softened, and then she frowned again—possibly because she could not keep the color entirely from her own cheeks.

"It is nothing!" she said, with a wave of her hand.

No manifestation of displeasure at his slip of the tongue could have subdued her lover like this gesture of impatience, slight though it was.

"I had a notion o' my own," he ventured, humbly, "so's you could put the thing through without sp'ilin' yer—without losin' yer ha'r."

Si could have bitten his unlucky tongue for the blunders it betrayed him into.

"What plan?" asked Beth, hastening to get on safe ground again.

"If you could bring yerself to wear a Greaser outfit, it would answer better in more ways'n one."

"I have no objection. Perhaps it would be a more effectual disguise."

"It wouldn't be nothin' else!" cried Si, in sudden enthusiasm, elated at her ready acceptance. "You could bind yer ha'r up in a handkerchief, an' nobody the wiser. Then you could brown yer skin with a dye as I kin make—best thing out for mahogany! Then a Greaser don't have to be so big, when he's full-grown, an' kin have a more womanish face an' no questions asked. An' then his clo'se ain't sich a give-away on shape. A woman don't make no good man in no minin', no more in no cowboy, outfit. Oh, it's a heap better, all round!"

Si was again "a total wreck." But his enthusiasm had carried him through.

Beth's interested look showed that she fully appreciated the advantages of his plan.

"All but the language," she said. "I should be hopelessly at fault there."

"I've thought o' that," answered Si. "We kin fix it so's you won't have to open yer mouth—only fur eatin'!"

"But I shall have to be in the presence of the men who accompany us," she urged, with a perplexed look. "And to refuse to let my voice be heard would excite their suspicions at once."

"Not if they believe that you air dumb."

"Dumb!"

"It'll be rough on ye, an' that's a fact, to keep still so long," admitted Si, with no perception of the humor in his words. "But I reckon it's the only way. An' I'd make it as easy fur ye as I could. I'll let on to the boys as you're boss o' the expedition, which the same will be gospel truth. You've give me my orders beforehand, ye understand, an' when it's necessary you kin write what you want to say, if any o' the boys is about. It won't be hard to make chances to talk things over more free, when you want to."

"You have forgotten nothing! It is just the plan!" cried Beth, with a pleased look.

Si's glance fell before hers. He could not meet her eye with that expression in it, and run the risk of startling her by what his own might reveal.

"How soon can the dress be got?" asked Beth, as if impatient to set out at once. "Are there any Mexicans in this part of the country? I supposed they were only further to the south, or in California."

"Thar's one as I'm bekownst to, as'll be down from the north, whar he's gone with some cattle, in a week or two. He won't go by without passin' through the Bend. Then I'll foller him, an' dicker fur his outfit. I reckon I wouldn't git it, an' put him in Americano togs even fur a few days, only he owes me a good turn."

"Would it be intrusive to ask how?" said Beth, with a look of keen curiosity.

"Not in you, ma'am," answered Si, with a deferential bow. "I stood in with him once when the boys had him bad. They will have their fun with a Greaser now an' ag'in. But Don Carlos is whiter'n most, an' it was a shame to crowd him."

So modestly did the hero of Mulligan's Bend refer to an act of courage almost without a parallel, even in that country where men take their lives in their hands every day.

At the risk of his own life, he had rescued this member of a hated race from the hands of an infuriate mob. While the "Greaser" lay not daring to lift a finger in his own defense lest he precipitate the rage of the mob anew, Six-foot Si had stood astride of his body holding the ruffians at bay with drawn revolvers, while he "stood them off" with words and glances that showed that he was prepared to die on the spot—but not till he had piled a rampart of dead

men about him—before he would be driven from the cause he had championed.

Where he lay, raging within, yet outwardly as motionless as if he were dead, Parson Edwards heard this plan to the end, and then the speakers arose and went back over the path they had come, without discovering his vicinity.

When the retreating footsteps had died away he sat up, and the expression of his face would have been a study for an artist who wished to depict a soul wholly given over to the devil.

No beast of prey could have peered more fiercely forth from his lair than did this man through a break in the foliage after the disappearing figure of the one he loved and the one he hated.

Not a movement of the woman's lithe grace escaped his hungry eye, not a line of the man's commanding figure.

"Ah! if she so swayed me as a girl, what is she now as a woman!" he ejaculated. "I should have killed her then, when she spurned me. It would have spared me this hour of hell."

He ground his teeth in bitter rage, while his distorted face alternated between a purple flush and the leaden pallor of death.

"No! no!" he cried, striking his breast with his clinched hand. "It is to possess her! She shall be mine in spite of all, her will included. But how? how? I cannot seize her, and carry her off by force. But subterfuge—that is my recourse. I will win his confidence, join in this expedition, and then, when all are beyond the reach of help, will come my time."

He left Mulligan's Bend early the next morning, to re-enter it the day following in an entirely different character—thanks to his bulging umbrella.

"Now!" he cried within himself, "let the better man win!"

CHAPTER VIII.

A GUARANTEED OUTFIT.

INTO Mulligan's Bend came a "tenderfoot" of rather unusual appearance. He was not a young man just starting out in life and confident of success in this country where the prizes were open to all who would strive for them.

On the contrary, he was in middle life, with the air of one who had been sobered, even saddened, if not dispirited, by the conflict in which few attain their hopes, while many are overwhelmed with despair.

He sought the acquaintance of no one; and, repelled by a certain air of superiority in his cold reserve, the boys one and all gave him a wide berth, till Six-foot Si presented himself on the scene.

It was Si's custom to "size up" every one who came to Mulligan's Bend, and the classification thus made was often of service to him as the representative law-and-order man of the camp.

He now approached the stranger with the unceremonious freedom of the West.

"I hope I see you well, sir."

"Thank you, I am quite well."

"You might be strange to this country."

"Yes."

"From the States, I reckon. They're sendin' us some o' their best men, an' we try to show 'em that thar ain't no better field fur enterprise an' capital than right hyar at Mulligan's Bend."

This feeler indicated that Si had already set the stranger down as a business man.

It drew forth a faint smile, tinged with sarcastic bitterness, and the answer:

"Capital is welcome almost anywhere."

"Oh! but we want live men too, capital or no capital. Hyar's as good a place as any to make a fresh start. Minin' pays, ef the boys, most of 'em, didn't run all their dust through these hyar sluice-boxes."

And with a glance around Si indicated the saloon in which they sat.

He had already set the stranger down as a man who had failed in business, a man of superior intelligence, a man who would go seriously to work to retrieve his fortunes, a man who would be on the side of law and order, a man therefore who was in every way desirable as a fellow-citizen.

Thus far the stranger had rather repelled the advances made to him, but his manner now underwent an abrupt change.

Turning to Si and gazing searchingly in his face, he asked, in an almost confidential tone:

"Suppose a man were to come here with nothing but his two hands, what would be his chance?"

"Good!" cried Si, confidently; "as good as the best."

"With no knowledge whatever of mining?"

"If he ain't afraid of a pick, an' air't too proud to git on friendly terms with a shovel, he needn't ask no odds o' nobody."

"Do you mean to say that?"

"Of course I mean to say it. We've got some mighty good men in the mines—gentlemen, sir, ef you'd take the trouble to scare 'em up; men used to broadcloth, as never wore patched breeches—let alone patchin' 'em themselves—till they come hyar. But they may ride in their coach an' four yit."

The stranger scanned the speaker's face, as if

fearful of allowing himself to be seduced by this dazzling hope.

Presently he said, slowly:

"I have a fancy that if one could get employment with a man of experience, so that he could learn something about the indications that one hears so much said about, and on which everything seems to depend, then there might be some chance."

There was a curious blending of emotions in this speech. It began with the shrinking humiliation of a man unused to asking for work, and ended with the hopelessness of disappointing experience.

"Why, bless your soul an' body!" cried Six-foot Si, encouragingly. "Indication be blowed! Thar ain't nothin' like fool's luck in minin'. Jest strike your pick into the most unlikely claim you kin scare up—take what's left after everybody else has had his pick—an' you're as like to strike a bonanza as anybody."

The stranger shook his head despondently.

"That sounds well," he said, "for those who have found success."

"Oh, waal, if you'd druther hire out, you kin do that too."

"With whom?"

"With the first man you meet."

"You are the first man I have met in Mulligan's Bend," responded the stranger, with a bitter smile.

"Good enough!" cried Six-foot Si. "Is that a banter?"

"Oh, no!" declared the other, with a wave of the hand, as if, having spoken in desperation, he was too hopeless to follow the matter up.

"Hold on!" protested Si. "Hold on! We don't throw off on a fair proposition that sort o' way. If it's work you're after, you'll never strike a better chance than with Six-foot Si, at yer service. Thar's oceans an' slathers o' work; an' as fur pay, you'll stand your chance with the rest. I guarantee the grub, an' you git your percentage fur the rest."

"Will you take me?" cried the stranger, suddenly grasping Si's hand.

"Of course I will. I always talk business when I say anythin' at all."

The stranger seemed too deeply moved to speak at once. When he did speak, his voice was quite hoarse.

"How soon shall we begin?"

"The first thing in the mornin'."

The stranger passed his hand vaguely across his forehead, and then, after a pause, he went on, with a smile that was almost ghastly:

"I suppose I ought to be ashamed to tell you that I haven't had anything to eat for—for some time."

"Good heavens!" cried Si, leaping to his feet with generous sympathy. "Waal, we'll soon fix that, anyway. Step right this hyar way."

He strode toward a door opening from the saloon into an inner room; but suddenly he stopped, plunged his hand into his pocket, and thrust into the stranger's hand what he drew forth.

"Go in thar an' order what ye want," he said, and quickly turned away.

Nothing could exceed the delicacy of this act. It was the instinctive consideration for the feelings of another evinced by a born gentleman.

The man who had first presented himself here as Parson Edwards, and who was now about to consummate a deeper treachery in another assumed character, felt it cut to the quick. He flushed with shame, and then turned pale with rage.

"Curse him! I'll pay him for this, too!"

When he had eaten he returned to Si, and introduced himself as Jason Cartwright.

Nowhere else is the democratic idea carried out as in the West. There a man passes for what he is in himself. Yet, by an odd inconsistency, nowhere else does one hear so many titles.

The point is, that differences in men are as fully recognized there as anywhere, only they try to put them on a manhood basis.

In pursuance of this custom, Six-foot Si at once sought to give the new-comer the standing in the community which he was fitted to occupy, and to this end introduced him as Judge Cartwright.

The stranger received this title with a violent start, and then, recovering himself, said with a deprecating smile:

"No titles, if you please. Call me plain Jason Cartwright."

"Nonsense!" exclaimed Si. "You can't git along in this country without a handle of some sort, an' ef anybody knows a handier one than that, let him show it up. What's the word, boys? Is it judge, or major?"

"You kin be Judge Cartwright hyar, an' anythin' else you please when you move on," suggested a bystander, with a laugh.

"Which the same may it be a long way off," said Si, heartily.

The plotter had now his place. The issue depended upon his skill in playing his part.

Six-foot Si found in his new employee a man who worked with intelligence and energy. Nothing is more clearly proved than that, when

they make up their minds to work—and the same is true of fighting—men of brains are more effective than those who are much more muscular but of inferior mental endowment. (Of course, a dude has neither brains nor muscle.)

But every effort of Si's to make Cartwright a man of prominence failed.

He treated every one with a cold reserve, which was too polite to give offense, yet which ruined his popularity.

Only when alone with Six-foot Si did he speak freely; but then he seemed to throw off all restraint, and assumed a fraternally confidential manner that would have won upon any man.

On one subject—himself—he was reserved; on one subject—woman—he was dumb. He never seemed willingly to look at one of the sex, though there were some in Mulligan's Bend well worth more than a passing glance.

Beth had left the camp, no one knew whither, immediately after his arrival; so Si had every reason to believe that he had never seen her.

Finally, he was a good shot, and had the bearing of a man of nerve.

"I'll take him along with me," said Si to himself. "I want one man that I'm sure I kin tie to, no matter what turns up."

"Nothing would please me better," said Cartwright, when the subject was broached. "To be frank with you, I want distraction as much as anything; and while I do not mind the work, it is just a little bit dull here."

"Thar'll be oceans o' fun in this hyar expedition, an' maybe big money. One thing'll be a mite queer, perhaps. Don Rubio is dumb, though he hears as well as you or me. I kin talk to him, but he has to write what he wants to say to me. I reckon it wouldn't be much, even if he had the use of his tongue, fur he's as proud as ye please, an' don't have nothin' to do with nobody, as fur as he kin help. But he's a capital feller, though, at heart."

Soon they left the camp together, as mysteriously as Beth had done.

At Shaddock's Crossing, Si made what he believed to be a lucky hit. There he ran upon an old acquaintance in the person of Luke Wygunt.

Wygunt had been a rattle-headed sort of a fellow, but a perfect cyclone in a fight, and Si had liked him for his generous impulses.

Now he had a little more pronounced swagger than in the old days. A student of human nature might have noticed that he laughed a great deal, and his eye was restless. However, he seemed to be delighted to see his old side pard, as he called Si, though there had never been that intimate relation between them.

"But what be you doin' now?" he asked. "I'm on the tramp, myself. Me an' a leetle gang o' the boys is jest in from a prospectin' tour. Thar ain't nothin' in it no more, I reckon. We hain't airnt our grub-stakes. But we've had stacks o' fun, you bet! Injun-fightin'? Now I never was in such a crowd fur Injun-fightin'. I call 'em my wild cat. We collared more blood an' ha'r fur the time we was at it than it was ever my good luck to be into before. One squeak I 'lowed they was goin' to git away with us, but the boys come ag'in, an' we rushed 'em. I don't want no better fun than that. It was worth the hull trip."

"How much of a party have you got?"

"Thar's ten of us all told. It's a pity to break up sich a sweet gang, but I reckon they won't all of 'em be content to settle down in no one-hoss town, an' grub fur day's rations. One-half of 'em was fur keepin' the ball rollin', make or break; but the other half wanted a guarantee. I'm fur goin' yer pile while ye're in; but ye can't please everybody."

"Look hyar, Luke. You know yer own crowd. Kin ye tie to all o' these hyar?"

"What fur? For fightin'? Oh, they'll never leave ye in a hole. They likes it too well."

"Fur everythin'. Fur obeyin' orders without no back-slack. Fur not gittin' drunk, an' all that."

"Waal, the boys likes their licker, as who don't. But business is business. Ye might have to drum 'em out o' some bad holes, to git 'em together; but as quick as you git 'em away from these hyar camp-suckers, they'll straighten up, an' come round in as good shape as ye want 'em."

"I want a crowd, Luke—a crowd that I'll know whar they're goin' to be when I want 'em. I don't want no fightin' among themselves, nor none o' that. I want a crowd o' decent white men."

"Waal, now, I don't know what you call white; but I've run with this hyar gang now fur the best part o' three months, an'—Waal, to be sure, thar was one knock-down; but that was along jest at first; that's fit out now, an' they know who's cock o' the walk. Thar ain't but one man in the gang what's got anythin' vicious in him, an' that's only when he's drunk. Take 'em all round, I never want to travel with a better-hearted lot."

Nothing could be franker than Luke's manner. He seemed to wish to state the case exactly as it was. His very exceptions told in favor of the crowd as a whole.

"You remember Don Rubio Caravena, don't you, Luke?" Si proceeded.

"What—the Greaser you snaked out o' Paddy Tookey's ranch when the Bulger's gang was jumpin' him?"

"Oh, no. That was somebody else altogether. But wasn't you at Canvass City when the Don was thar? You'd order remember him. You will when I tell ye he was dumb. Don't you remember Kip Stockton's gilt-edged lay-out, an' the big game the Don played thar one night?"

"No—no. I reckon that was before my time."

"Why, you know Kip Stockton."

"Like a book. But he was broke up before I ever see Canvass City."

"Is that so? Waal, any way, the Don has got a leetle scheme on foot, an' he's got me to look up a crowd fur him. He always was a tony cuss, an' never would put his hand to anythin' but a pack o' keards. I want to do the thing up to his notion, ef I kin; for thar's like to be money in it fur me, if he's satisfied. But he'll kick like sin ef the thing don't go off smooth, an' he looks to me to guarantee the men. If you say these air all right, I'll look 'em over, an' ef I don't think different, I'll take 'em on your recommend."

"Waal, Si, I wouldn't like to git you in a hole—you know that. I don't know how per-tick'ler your Don is; but I will say this:—if he left it to me, I'd tell him—Waal, never mind what I'd tell him; but I'd put my money up on 'em. You kin look 'em over, an' ef thar's any you don't like, you kin throw 'em out an' take the rest. They've come into camp to scratch around fur whatever they kin git; an' you hire 'em separate, if you like."

"They may gag a mite at the Greaser," Luke was frank enough to admit, in conclusion, "but they won't want nothin' better than to go along o' you. An' one thing you kin count on:—if they take his money, they'll stand by him till the last dog's bung."

Nothing could seem fairer than this, and Si set out to look the men over.

It is probable that a temperance advocate would have taken exception to most if not all of the men whom Wygunt presented as candidates for Si's approval.

They were scattered all about the camp, having a good time as it is understood by men of that sort. They were drinking, and gambling, and singing, and wrangling as men will when they have just enough liquor in them to argue by the hour over nothings, which nobody knows or cares anything about except when he is in his cups. One was presiding at a cock fight, and Si's presentation to another had to be deferred till he concluded a fistic mill in which he knocked his adversary silly in the eleventh round.

However, Six-foot Si was used to that life, and knew very well that men who are not good for one thing may yet be all that could be desired for another.

What he wanted was a party of men who would act together under his command with a reasonable degree of harmony, and who would stand by him to the death if the occasion demanded.

He accepted the men recommended by his old friend, his love prompting the addition of one other.

He went fifty miles to secure a surgeon whom he knew, so that if Beth should be wounded, she would have proper attendance at once.

With this company he sought the camp where Beth had been living in the character of Don Rubio Caravena.

When they were presented for her approval, she scarcely glanced at them, but indicated with a wave of the hand her acquiescence in whatever her agent had decided upon.

So they set out into the craggy wilderness, and so excellent was her make-up and so perfect her acting, that no one whose suspicions had not been aroused beforehand would have suspected the ruse.

She walked with the strut of a Spanish dude; she rode as if born to the saddle; she rolled cigarettes as deftly as if she had learned the art in Cadiz.

Six-foot Si had got his men all sobered up before they came into her presence, and he was more than pleased with the way they behaved themselves when they were fairly on their way to the Lost Mine.

If he had only known! if he had only known!

And there was one other—the man he trusted most!

CHAPTER IX.

THE CAST OF THE DIE.

It was natural that Don Rubio and his agent should ride together; and a casual observer would have found nothing to envy in Six-foot Si's lot, since they rode for the most part in silence, because of the apparent deprivation of speech in one.

But to the eye of jealous love every fleeting expression of the countenance, every movement of the body, was vocal with a thousand tongues.

Cartwright could not fail to see that Six-foot Si was absorbed, heart and mind, in Beth Crawford. To others he talked with his lips, his thoughts, much more his feelings, always

playing truant. To Beth he spoke without words, from the depths of his soul.

And what of her?

Just now she was preoccupied with grief for the man to whom she had proved constant through years of almost hopeless separation.

But the grave cancels all allegiance. Love with that seal upon it softens into tender memory, which urges no claim, and builds no barrier.

Beth's manner showed that she knew Si for what he was. If there was no tenderness in her glance, there was at least perfect confidence.

So vigilant over himself that no one discovered that he ever cast more than a passing glance at Don Rubio, Cartwright drank this cup of gall to the dregs.

And ever in his secret heart he loved more and hated more.

"How could I submit to lose her?" he asked himself, gazing at the profile of Beth's face, or the curve of her cheek.

Her beauty was of form and expression. The olive stain could not disguise that. Even the silken mustache of raven blackness which now incumbered her lip could not rob her of the exquisite charm of womanhood which he saw behind it.

"I gave her up to that lout!" he said, grinding his teeth with rage as he recalled Bob Cady as he had known him. "And she preferred him to me—even him! And now this one!"

But, however he might disparage Bob Cady, he could not look at Six-foot Si without feeling that here was one, though at a disadvantage in the learning of the schools and in the polish which society gives, yet mentally as good a man as he, and physically and morally his superior.

Far into the night, when others slept, this man lay awake, meditating revenge and some treacherous plot by which he could gain possession of the woman he coveted.

"Love!" he muttered—"I can never hope for that. She will always loathe me. But she shall fear me; she shall obey me!"

Even before leaving Mulligan's Bend he had outlined his plot roughly. This had led him to propose that the commissariat be left to him. While willing that he should secure the provisions, Si opposed his taking the cooking upon himself, but he insisted that it was his preference.

The others were willing to leave it to him, wondering at his taste.

Everybody praised his cooking, and thought no more of it.

So they proceeded into the wilderness, till, goaded to madness, he resolved to stake all upon a single die.

That night he prepared their food with his usual skill, but also something more. Then he lay awake, a prey to a thousand fears.

He strained his sense of hearing to distinguish their individual breathings. Some snored so lustily that he execrated them for drowning the sounds the others made.

He waited till the position of the moon in the heavens indicated the hour of midnight. Then he rose, and with his breast the harbor of a thousand tumults, visited each sleeper in turn, and stumbled against some part of his body, as if by accident.

Most lay like logs; here and there one moved, but slept on. One muttered an inarticulate oath, and snored again.

Next he visited the sentinels. All slept on their posts.

Returning to the central group, he hesitatingly and with more agitation than in any other case, approached one whom he had left till the last—one who lay a little apart.

Wrapped in a blanket, like the commonest of his men, Don Rubio lay asleep on the ground.

Six-foot Si lay between him and the others, but nearest them. This was the only mark of his watchful care.

With beads of perspiration on his brow—so profoundly was he affected—Cartwright bent over the sleeping Don, and finally knelt beside the recumbent figure.

"What lies between now and to-morrow's sun?" he asked himself. "Hatred blazing from her eyes, execration from his lips! She will attempt my life, if she is given the chance—anything to escape my touch!"

This seemed to overpower him.

But there came another voice—a voice that seemed to laugh with demoniac exultation.

"Undisputed possession of her!" it whispered. It was so real, so close to his ear, that he started and half turned his head.

But then he laughed, a laugh that was only a paroxysm of pain, and stretching out his hand, touched her.

She too was held in thrall by the drug he had administered.

"If only she were dead!" he muttered, "and I dead with her!"

But then he was seized with a spasm of fear, she lay so like one dead, her hand, as he accidentally touched it, cold and lifeless, and clammy with the night dew.

He seized her, and shook her. He bent over her, and breathed her name into her ear.

"Beth! Beth!"

But this was folly. She would wake in due time, but wake to curse him!

In sudden rage he went and stood over Six-foot Si.

"I could kill him as he lies!" he muttered. "Curse him! curse him! She would some day yield herself to his arms with delight. Curse him! curse him!"

He drew a revolver from his belt, and not till he looked at it thinking how inappropriate this was to the occasion, thrust it back again.

Then he drew his bowie.

This was the assassin's weapon! This was voiceless, and never betrayed the hand that wielded it! This was for striking in the dark! for the coward's blow—the blow in the back—the blow at a sleeping enemy, or, for that matter, a sleeping friend!

He knelt beside the figure of his benefactor, and poised the infamous weapon!

So massive, so powerful, he lay so passive, his broad breast awaiting the sting that would still its pulses forever! But now a creature of life and purpose and emotion, and now a thing of senseless clay!

The last words he had said before lying down here to sleep in perfect confidence, while his hand fell in kindness on the shoulder of him who now knelt with murder in his heart and death in his hand, were:

"Your coffee warms the very cockles o' my heart, ole man!"

And to the excited fancy of the murderer to whom these words recurred, the moonlight playing over his face seemed to reproduce the smile which accompanied this expression of good-will.

Cartwright brushed his hand across his eyes, and shuddering started up.

"No! no!" he muttered. "His death will profit me nothing! I cannot strike him out of her heart, if he is there already! It will only add horror to what is dark enough already, God knows!"

He went back to Beth, and lifted her in his arms.

The sense of falling caused her automatically to throw her arm about his neck.

He knew that this was not a conscious act, yet it thrilled him with a mad elation such as he had never known before.

With a murmur of ecstasy he strained her to his breast and kissed her unresponsive lips.

Even this made him reel as with intoxication.

"Ah!" he cried, "if to rob her helplessness can so sway me, what would it be to have her give freely all the wealth of her beauty, of her love!"

But the bitter reality dispelled these illusions of his fevered imagination.

So, torn by conflicting emotions, he bore her to where the horses were picketed.

Why did not the sleeping guard arouse and dispute his passage? But he did not. The robber rode away with his prize!

The stillness of night and desolation settled down again upon the spot, broken only by the stertorous breathing of the drugged men.

Slowly the moon followed her course to the western horizon. Then the east began to glow; at first with a gray, silvery haziness; then with a golden splendor that blotted out the stars and finally the shimmering planet that hung like a quivering burnished shield in the sky.

A low rustle was followed by the crooning of a mother bird to her nestlings.

A clear liquid note pierced the stillness.

It was responded to from a little distance by a rippling string of pearls of melodious sound.

Then came a sudden burst of minstrelsy, and the glad earth was awake again.

The horses tossed their heads, and stamped, and whinnied impatiently; but their masters slept on.

The sun rose, higher! higher! higher! It pierced the fluttering foliage, and played in dazzling flecks over the men's faces.

At last one moved restlessly, turning to avoid the importunity of the sunshine; but it pursued him teasingly.

Finally he sat up, rubbing his eyes and yawning drowsily.

Still with befogged brain, he stared about upon his sleeping comrades with dull wonder. Then suddenly he started into more complete wakefulness, and looked at the sun.

"Waal! waal! waal!" he ejaculated, starting to his feet. "What's this? We've all gone daft. Hallo, boys! Rouse out o' this. Blessed ef it ain't 'most noon, an' we sleepin' yet. Hyar, Luke! Doc! Payton! What's got into everybody? Whar's the judge? He's got the start of us all."

Failing to rouse them by this appeal, he went from one to another, shaking them, some into stupid, some into irritable, semi-consciousness.

They sat up and stared at him with dull, heavy eyes, slowly coming to a realization that something unusual had happened.

"What's the matter with us all?" he cried, with increasing amazement.

"Matter!" repeated Doc Cranch. "We've been drugged. Whew! I've got a head on me as big as a bear keg! Cartwright has poisoned us all with his dirty skillet."

Si immediately thought of Beth. Was she sharing the general suffering?

A stride took him to where she had lain. Her place was vacant!

"Why," he cried, "whar's Don Rubio? Why didn't he rout us out? He's up ahead of us."

But a vague, ill-defined fear had seized upon his heart. Without telling himself why he did it, he ran to where the horses were picketed.

Two were missing, and the best at that.

"Why, what's this, boys?" he asked, returning to them white and trembling with apprehension. "They're gone—the judge an' Don Rubio! Kin they have been carried off? Who could carry 'em off, an' we not know it?"

But now he stared at his men, wondering at their changed demeanor. Some looked doggedly sullen, some glared at him ferociously.

"Luke, what's the row?" he asked, turning to his old friend for explanation, since he was in a measure the representative man of the crowd he had recommended.

But Luke stood with his head hanging on his breast, frowning with irritation.

One who had been the least forward hitherto now stood foremost, regarding Si with an insolent smile of derision and something more.

"It is a mite queer that anybody should steal 'em," he said, slowly—"Don Rubio an' your particular pet, the judge. It is a mite queer that we should all be drugged, the cook bein' your particular pet, the judge. Now, suppose you answer your own conundrum. What's all this hyar?"

"What do ye mean?" demanded Si, angrily. "Who air you, an' who told you to play spokes-man?"

For answer, the fellow whisked off his hat with one hand, and a wig and false beard with the other, and stood revealed, Dandy Dave of Bloody Run!

"How's the Teaser?" he asked, with a taunting smile. "You give us the slip the other day as neatly as Don Rubio has to-day, an' your particular pet, the judge."

"Dandy Dave!" exclaimed Si.

"At your service!" responded Dave, with a bow.

Si's eye sought Luke Wygunt. The blended shame and defiance of a man who has to face the friend he has betrayed was in his bearing.

A swift glance around showed that Doc Cranch, the one man not included in Luke Wygunt's guaranty, had disappeared, and satisfied that he must stand alone, Si plucked out his revolver and stood at bay.

His thought was to let daylight through Dandy Dave first of all. But before he could bring the weapon to a bearing, everything suddenly faded from his vision, and he fell forward on his face.

He had been felled to the ground by a blow from behind.

When he recovered consciousness, he found himself disarmed and bound.

His first words were to Luke Wygunt.

"You have betrayed me!" he ejaculated, with more of agony than anger in his voice.

"That's so, pard," admitted Wygunt, doggedly.

"Oh, man! you don't know what you've done! If you had told me you wanted money—"

"It wa'n't money, Cap."

"What was it, then? Did I ever harm you?"

"No, you never did. I'm fair to say that. But this hyar gent," indicating Dandy Dave, "had the bulge on me, an' I caved."

Dandy Dave looked at Wygunt with a well-satisfied smile.

"I did have the bulge on you," he said, "an' I've got it yet."

Wygunt only scowled blackly.

Nothing would come of recriminations. It was plain that Luke was the victim and tool of a stronger man.

Si turned to Dandy Dave.

"Kin I make terms with you?" he asked.

"Easy," answered Dave.

"What do you want?"

"The leetle dockiment that we've all been figgerin' fur so close."

"I haven't it to give you."

"So Miss Falmouth—that is to say, Miss Crawford—looks out fur her own property?"

"You'll have to bargain with her. Whatever she agrees to, I of course don't gainsay."

"Waal, suppose you show her up, then."

"I show her up?"

"Yes, you show her up."

"You would have to wait a long time, Dandy Dave, for me to show her up, if I had her free of your clutches. You might burn me at a slow fire, an' I'd laugh at ye!"

"That thar's a good suggestion, about the fire. I reckon we may try that on you before we git through. But how is it that the scheme of your pet, the judge, worked so bad as to leave you behind? It's queer that he shouldn't put you up to his doctor's stuff."

"The judge!" repeated Si, with a start. "Do you mean to say that you hain't got him?"

"I wish I had."

"You're foolin' me, Dave!"

"Didn't you know he was goin' to clear out? Now, it would be funny if he has euchered you, too! Why, man, I do believe he's got away with your girl an' your gold-mine both!"

"You hain't got the judge? You hain't got—the—Don Rubio?"

"Not a hide or hair of 'em. Would I be such a fool as to drug myself an' my men?"

Six-foot Si burst into a shout of delighted laughter.

"I told him to look out fur the Don!" he cried. "I'll never forgit him fur this! I knowed I could tie to him! If he only gits away with ye now!"

"Why, you fool, he's played you as well as us! He's got away with the game, an' left us all holdin' the drawin'-strings of an empty bag!"

"You go on thinkin' so! Now I know I'm solid. You kin do what you like with me. He dropped to you, when I was as blind as an owl. He seen his chance, an' didn't have time to warn me; so he let me go, an' saved what was worth more a hundred times. That's what I call a friend, I do."

Six-foot Si was wild with delight and gratitude.

"Waal," said Dandy Dave, with a grim set of his lips, "I have a notion that you have that cryptogram, in your head if nowhar else; an' I'm goin' to have it out of ye before I go any fur-ther. Will you give it to me easy?"

"I hain't anythin' to give."

"Boys," said Dave, turning to his men, "fetch me some twigs hyar, an' some fire."

An armful of twigs was brought.

"Pile 'em on his stomach," ordered Dandy Dave, grimly.

This was done without the slightest show of hesitancy.

"You don't mean to say you're 'lowin' to burn me this hyar sort o' way?" cried Si, blanching at the horror of it.

"Not ef you give up the cryptogram," answered Dave, firmly.

"But give a man a show. If you ain't a coward, you'll stand up an' face me, man to man."

"I'd be a fool to do anythin' of the kind, when I have you dead to rights, as it is. What better do I want than this?"

"This hyar'll do purty good fur an Injun, but it ain't white."

"It suits me."

"I tell you I hain't got the cryptogram."

"Drawer it off fur me."

"I can't do it."

"Tell me whar to go to find the cache."

"I can't do that, an' I wouldn't if I could, not to save my life."

"Put fire to them thar twigs," ordered Dandy Dave.

This order was complied with as promptly as it was given.

Six-foot Si lay on his back, with his hands tied behind him. His legs also were securely bound. So he lay and gazed at the crackling fire, as if fascinated. His face was deadly white. His teeth were tight clinched. He was gathering strength to endure the awful torture with fortitude.

"She'll remember me," he said to himself. "She'll know I'd stand this an' a heap more fur her sake. If only Cartwright gits away with her! I'd keep these scoundrels hyar all day, ef I could."

CHAPTER X.

OUT OF THE FRYING-PAN INTO THE FIRE.

JUDGE CARTWRIGHT rode away carrying the unconscious Beth in his arms, and leading the horse intended for her use when she was restored to consciousness.

The moon, at the full in a cloudless sky, shed such an illumination that he had no difficulty in picking his way, and the ground over which he had to pass was so rocky that he left little or no trail behind him.

To carry a full-grown woman before one in the saddle, when she is limp with unconsciousness, is a task sufficient to tax any man, even though stimulated by excitement; and long before daylight he was fain to rest and neutralize the effect of the drug so that she could be self-helpful.

He had reached a state of desperation in which he cared nothing for consequences to himself if he failed to secure what he coveted.

"If I win her," he said, "he can do nothing. If I fail to win her, it matters little what he does."

But when he had dismounted and laid her on the ground where the moonlight fell full upon her face, the conviction that she would wake only to overwhelm him with reproaches and expressions of detestation was so strong, that he could not bring himself to destroy his present peaceful contemplation of her beauty.

"She is mine as long as she remains unconscious!" he said, kneeling beside her, and passing his hand gently over her smooth cheek.

So daybreak found him at this bitter-sweet indulgence of his miserable love.

But with the light of day came the fear of interference before he had made his appeal to her. Whatever was to be done could be delayed no longer.

He applied ammonia to her nostrils. All that was necessary was to arouse her to a conscious-

ness of her changed situation. Fear and indignation would do the rest.

Shrinking from the pungent essence, she opened her eyes, and seeing one who was almost a stranger to her bending over her as if she were ill, she started up, and forgetful of the part she was playing, cried:

"What is the matter?"

He rose without speaking, and stood looking at her sadly, appealingly.

She started hastily to her feet, and gazing about in search of Six-foot Si and the others, realized that she was alone with the man she had heard called Cartwright, of whom Si had spoken highly as his most trusted friend.

At the same time she realized that she had revealed her sex, if not her personal identity, by allowing her voice to be heard, and the hot blood surged in a wave of embarrassment all over her face.

However, this was no time for conventional niceties.

"Circumstances have betrayed me," she said, putting a bold face on the matter. "If you had not already discovered, you now know that I am not what I have tried to appear. But let us waste neither time nor words over that. Tell me—what has happened? Why are we alone? Where are the others?"

Still he gazed at her, unable to break the spell. She was speaking to him not unkindly. She regarded him as Si's trusted friend, and therefore one to whom she could turn without fear.

But now she shrunk away from him, involuntarily lifting her hand to her fluttering bosom.

"What is the matter?" she cried. "Why do you look at me so strangely?"

Then, what was it she saw in him that made her start and bend forward, staring wildly into his face?

What was it that shook her voice so that it was scarcely above a hoarse, tremulous whisper that she demanded:

"Who are you?"

"Can't you guess?" he asked sadly, in his natural voice.

A moment she hesitated, lifting her hand to her head, as if what occurred to her was incredible, impossible.

Then she cried, in a voice sharp with amazement:

"Judge Rountree!"

"Beth!" he exclaimed, extending his hands toward her.

She shrunk back with dilating and quivering nostrils and flashing eyes.

"What are you doing here?" she cried—"in disguise!"

"I am putting my life in the balance against my one chance of happiness."

She seemed at a loss what to reply. She was trying to realize what it all meant, for he had come upon her so unexpectedly, so strangely.

"Have you no other word for me?" he asked.

"I have no word for you at all," she answered with haughty displeasure, though no longer any apprehension. "What have you come here for? What are you trying to do? It isn't possible that you have intentionally—"

But here she broke off, with a swift flare of color in her cheeks.

"Followed you?" he completed for her. "Why not? Have not men done the like before?"

She turned away with freezing coldness.

"Enough of this!" she said. "Where are my friends? It is strange that they should leave me like this."

She was thinking of only one as she spoke. How could Six-foot Si allow anything to draw him away, without at least arousing her and apprising her of the exigency?

She thought that some great peril had menaced them, and he had gone to face it, leaving her in the care of one whom he considered as his best friend.

That he had been duped by Judge Rountree—to give him his true name, now that his aliases would no longer serve him—was evident.

Still, she saw no personal peril, and turned to her waiting horse confidently.

"Stop!" interposed her companion. "You have no friends within reach, if you do not count me as such."

She turned and looked at him inquiringly.

"What do you say?"

"You were not left by your friends, as you call them. I brought you here."

"You—brought—me—here!"

"While you were unconscious."

A wave of crimson swept all over her face; then she grew so white that it seemed as if she were about to faint. But she did not.

"How?"

"In my arms."

She shrunk from him with an indescribable look of loathing.

"Have you dared to touch me with the weight of your finger?" she demanded, with glances of indignation like flashes of lightning.

Then, with clinched hands, heaving breast, and quivering in every nerve with ineffable scorn and detestation:

"You villain—you infamous scoundrel! I'll have you horsewhipped!"

There are words that sting worse than the lash. There are tones more venomous than the bite of adders. There are looks that make the flesh quiver as if touched by flame.

With a low, hoarse oath, the man sprang forward and seized her by the wrist.

"Do you realize that you are in my power—absolutely?" he fairly hissed, to such a frenzy of rage was he whipped by the lash of her disdain.

Instead of looking into his face, she dropped her eyes to the hand that held her captive, and stood submissive, in proud defiance.

"Yes, I quite realize that I am in your power—absolutely, if you insist upon it."

"But you count upon your past experience of me. You do not reflect on what a desperate man may be driven to."

"Judging from my past experience of you, confirmed by your recent action, I think you equal to almost anything, without any particular driving, but only at the solicitation of your natural depravity."

"Have a care! have a care! I have borne all that I can from you!"

Then he broke down with a sudden appeal.

"Oh, Beth! Beth! why will you goad me to madness? I have followed you with love, and you repay me with scorn. Listen! You know that I love you—that I have loved you from the first—"

But now lifting her cold, hard eyes to his anguish-drawn face, she burst into a derisive laugh.

So close was she, not shrinking as he drew near, but proudly standing her ground, that he felt her breath in his face.

It was like a succession of quick slaps.

Furiously he flung her hand away from him, with such violence as to turn her half around.

She bowed an amused smile of thanks for her release.

"And now," she said, "if we are done with this melodrama, suppose we go back. You are in my secret, but I trust that you are too gallant to betray me to the others."

She turned toward her horse as if their return were a matter of course.

"Mount," he said, "but we shall not go back. I have gone too far to turn back."

Those words, spoken quietly, thrilled to the depths of her soul. She had not feared him before, counting, as he had said, on her acquaintance with him; but now her lips whitened.

The utter solitude, her helplessness, the determination of a man who had cut loose from the restraining influences of human society and staked everything upon the accomplishment of a set purpose, struck her all at once.

Then came a thought which she would not have anticipated, had this situation been presented to her imagination instead of in the bitter reality—a thrill of pitying anguish for Six-foot Si when he should learn that she had fallen a victim to the ruthless villainy of this desperate man.

It was followed by a surge of passionate protest from her heart, the full significance of which she did not then realize.

But of this emotion was born an idea which Judge Rountree had not forecast and provided against.

He had disarmed her, well knowing that she would have the courage to defend herself to the death.

But it had not occurred to him, as it now did to her, that she was dressed in male attire, including the spurs of a Mexican cavalier; and that she was in thorough training for the character.

He advanced to assist her to mount; but, putting her foot into the stirrup, she swung into the saddle, and with the same motion drove her spurs into the flanks of her horse.

With a scream of pain the horse leaped into the air with a bound that would have unseated her but that she was prepared for it.

"Go!" she cried, and drove the spurs home again.

Away sped the courser at a pace that menaced her neck and his own; but she thought of Six-foot Si before and Jim Rountree behind, and a mad elation drove out every thought of fear.

Away! away! like the wind! the iron-bound hoofs striking sparks from the flinty path.

She had no notion of direction; but any way that led from the villain who menaced her with a fate too horrible for contemplation would do for the present.

So sudden, so wholly unexpected, was her flight, that the man stood staring blankly after her, till she had gained a distance that placed her almost beyond pistol-range.

Then, as it flashed over him that she was really escaping him, that all he had passed through was going for naught; as in imagination he saw her rushing into Six-foot Si's arms, and weeping in ecstasy on his breast, while he soothed her with caresses and assurances that all peril was now past; a frenzy of murderous jealousy seized upon him, and whipping out his revolver, he leveled it at her back, and fired.

If he could not have her, the man he hated should not. He would kill her, and then blow his own brains out.

But the cry of rage with which he came to

this resolve caused her to glance over her shoulder; and seeing the murderer's purpose, she bowed to her horse's neck, and so escaped.

Before he had time for another shot, she had passed a crag which screened her from his aim. Springing to his horse, he leaped into the saddle, and gave chase.

Once more she was in sight, though at a greater distance.

Again he fired, this time at her horse, as offering a surer mark.

The animal winced, but only increased his pace under the spur of terror. The risk was fearful, with pitfalls and stumbling-blocks on every hand, but he was distancing his pursuer.

Shot after shot followed after, but now they flew wild, the murderer's rage making his aim less and less certain.

Shrieking with impotent fury, he kept on, even when there was no longer any chance of an effective shot. At any moment her horse might stumble and fall, leaving her at his mercy. In his madness he even prayed that she might be thrown.

But the fate besought for another fell upon the petitioner. He had scarcely time to fling his feet free of the stirrups as his horse went down, and he was hurled over his head, to lie stunned and bleeding on the rocky ground.

Unaware of this mishap, for she had now left her pursuer out of sight and hearing, Beth kept on at the same break-neck pace.

When the strain of immediate apprehension was relieved, it gave place to a sense of wild elation that goaded her forward as madly.

It was as if her heart were bursting with gladness, the cause of which she dreaded to face, and so sought to escape by this headlong flight.

On! on! with no aim save continuous motion. She had no thought of any deliberate plan of search for those she believed to be her friends. She might come upon them by chance; but otherwise how could she hope to thread that trackless wilderness.

She scarcely speculated as to the likelihood of coming upon a trail, or a mountain road, which might lead to some habitation of men.

She was gay with an almost delirious lightness of heart; she was free, as if the swift undulations of her galloping horse were the flight of a bird; the air as she cleft it fanned her temples with a delicious coolness.

Then, all unexpectedly, she came upon a body of horsemen; and overwhelmed by a feeling of shame and timidity which she did not seek to analyze, she drew rein abruptly, and sat trembling with a fear that had no sense of personal danger in it, but on the contrary an assurance of safety and peace, while, with a shout of discovery, the riders turned her way and gathered about her.

But now she looked from face to face recognizing no one, till a voice that filled her with sickening dread drew her eyes to the face of the speaker.

"By all that's lucky, the bird has come flutterin' into our cage of her own notion! How do you do, my dear? You're welcome as flowers in May!"

And she gazed into the evil face of Old-man Crocker!

But this was not all. Turning in his saddle, to look in the direction whence he and his men had just come, he shouted mockingly:

"What ho! ye bearers of the Prince's palanquin!"

And he beckoned with a wave of his arm.

Beth looked, and saw two horses, one before the other, with long poles on either side, between which was stretched a blanket, forming a litter in which some one lay.

As it drew near Old-man Crocker cried:

"Look, my dear! What do you think o' this raw head an' bloody bones what has been seekin' you the wide world over, sighin' fur true love or the peace o' the tomb?"

To the man in the litter he went on:

"What do ye want better'n this hyar? Raise, sweet Romeo, an' gaze on the blushin' beauty o' your Juliet."

The man in the litter turned with an effort to rise on his elbow, lifting to view a head bound about with a bloody bandage, beneath which wild, feverish eyes peered from their cavernous sockets, out of a face ghastly with emaciation and pallor.

Her eyes distended with horror. Beth's gaze met that of Joe Moran!

CHAPTER XI.

OLD-MAN CROCKER BLUFFED.

"WAAL," cried Old-man Crocker, grinning at the expression of dismay on Beth's face and the wondering surprise in Joe Moran's, "thar ain't nothin' in this hyar world like the feelin' of a couple o' happy young lovers when they sight each other ag'in after a cruel, heart-breakin' separation. I've been thar myself!"

Joe Moran was the first to speak, though not till he had sunk back upon his litter, gasping with exhaustion.

"What's this hyar tom-foolery?" he asked. "What fur do ye suppose I'd want to look at that blasted Greaser? I don't owe him nothin'."

Old-man Crocker stared, then burst into a yell of laughter.

"The deuce ye don't!" he cried. "Waal, I 'low you owe this hyar Greaser fur a dose what'll shove you under ground before you git it out o' yer system."

"I tell ye, you're off yer base!" replied Moran, fretfully. "No Greaser in mine, ef you please!"

Again Old-man Crocker laughed.

"Hyar, you galoots! Turn that thar litter around, so's his nibs kin gaze on the Greaser without gittin' a crick in his neck. So! prop his head up on that pole. Now will you take yer Bible oath as you never swore that you loved this Greaser better'n any white man you ever see? Look sharp! We've got ye down fine. Ye can't gig back on that proposition. You was jest hankerin' after Greaser; you'd leave yer whisky fur Greaser; an' now you're a-kickin'!"

Joe gazed at the stranger with a slow-coming perception of something familiar, but answered:

"Waal, maybe I have seen the snoozer som'ers. But ef I've any leetle outstandin' account with him, it's clean gone out o' my head; so he needn't stick his eyes through me."

"Haw! haw! haw! Waal, now, that thar's good, that is! But I reckon the Don'll disremember you too. Blast me ef I wouldn't return the compliment, ef you throwed off on me like that. What's the word, Excellenza? Do you drop to this hyar ole stoughton-bottle? I reckon you didn't 'low as he'd ever go back on ye; did ye, now?"

Beth made no reply. Horror at the wreck Joe Moran had become, indirectly through her agency, left no room for resentment of Old-man Crocker's insolence.

It was no satisfaction to her now to know that she had only taken her own from this robber, leaving the murder of her lover unavenged. Her purpose had been the old savage law—an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth!

Now she wondered how she could have brought herself to such feelings and such acts, however great her wrong. Now she realized that nothing so defeats itself as revenge. Now she felt only pity and regret, and need of his forgiveness.

"Thar you have it," pursued Crocker. "The Don don't know you!"

"An' little love lost between us," answered Moran. "To the deuce with him!"

"But suppose Miss Falmouth was ragged out in these hyar togs? Would she look anythin' like—"

"Miss—what?"

"Beth Crawford, ef you like that better."

"Moran started up on his elbow again, and stared at the seeming Mexican.

"It is her!" he said, finally. "I'll be hanged ef it ain't!"

"You bet yer sweet life!" cried Crocker, suddenly merging his bantering air into one of serious determination. "An' that's what fetches us hyar!"

The expression on Joe Moran's face changed, as he sunk back once more, breathless.

He did not take his eyes from Beth's face. He looked sad, as with tender sentiments softened by regret.

"It's too late now," he thought to himself. "I ain't no good no more!"

But he uttered no audible word.

"It's Beth Crawford!" repeated Old-man Crocker, compressing his lips when the name had passed them. "An' Beth Crawford means the cryptogram; an' the cryptogram means the Lost Mine; an' the Lost Mine means a bar'lful o' gold; an' a bar'lful o' gold means a daisy lay-out what'll keep on grindin' a golden grist as long as ye're a mind to run it!"

By this time his face was demoniac with cupidity. Joe Moran saw again in his eyes the wolfish glitter which had made his flesh creep while Crocker was proposing that he draw a duplicate of the cryptogram from memory.

"Ha! ha!" he chuckled, rubbing his hand with ghoulish exultation. "She looms up like a mirage! I kin see her jest as plain as if she stood right thar!"

He pointed before him, staring into vacancy, with so vivid an expression of actual vision on his face, that his auditors followed his glance expectantly.

"Oh, ye needn't look!" he cried. "You can't see it, but I kin. You hain't dreamed of it nights, an' waked up an' still seen it all around ye thar in the dark."

They stared at him with expressions of growing uncertainty.

"Loony?" he laughed. "Oh, no! Thar ain't no kinks in my top-knot! It's only a rushin' town, with the sweetest crowd o' jay-birds that ever made the angels weep—an' Ole-man Crocker layin' down the law to 'em! Whoop! I'm a-comin', boys! I'll git thar in due time!"

The man was half-mad with the conviction that the ambition of his life was now to be realized.

"Bloody Run!" he bellowed, in a ringing tone of challenge.

Then, with a wolfish snarl of ineffable contempt, dropping his voice into a low, deep base:

"Bloody Run ain't nowhar!"

He glared around on the crowd, as if looking for one who would stand up for the place he disparaged.

No one there would have dared to provoke his wrath at that moment.

Then crouching so as to double his body into a grotesque mockery of humble petitioning, he crept toward Beth, wagging his extended hand.

"Putt'er thar, my lady! Put'er whar she'll keep!"

"What do you wish?" cried Beth, now goaded to speech, as she shrunk from him.

"Only a leetle dockiment—a dirty leetle dockiment—some bits o' wrappin' paper what nobody'd be found dead with. A cryptogram, they call it. Now, I'm death on cryptograms—I am sol Put'er thar gently!"

"But I have nothing of the kind," protested Beth.

Old-man Crocker looked at her, and grinned, the same hyena-like grin of incredulity with which he had received Joe Moran's assurance that he had had the cryptogram in possession without committing it to memory.

"You'll think that over ag'in, an' it'll come to ye whar ye put it," he said. "Take it slow. It might be in yer stockin', now, whar ye wouldn't be apt to lose it."

"I have no such paper."

"To hyear ye say it, 'most anybody would believe ye. O' course ye wouldn't want to give it to every beggar as asked ye. Thar's tender associations, an' all that. But let me see it, now, do!"

"I tell you the cryptogram is not in my possession."

"A woman kin lie so e-e-e-easy!"

To this open insult there was no possible reply. Beth turned her flashing eyes upon the circle of observant faces gathered around.

"Are you men," she cried, "and listen to this unmoved?"

Crocker looked around on his ruffians, and answered for them.

"No; them's dogs o' mine as comes only at their master's whistle. But we're gittin' off the subject. I reckon you wouldn't want me to look fur that cryptogram myself?"

There was a devilish menace in his eyes, made more terrible by his persistent grin. It was plain that he was determined to have the cipher, and would stop at no outrage.

From what she had already seen of the ruffians at his back, the defenseless girl had no hope of succor from them.

Instinctively she felt for the weapons she had carried, determined to protect herself even to the taking of the villain's life, if necessary.

But Jim Rountree had disarmed her!

Old-man Crocker saw her extremity with an even more fiendish grin.

"Think better of it, honey!" he urged, coaxingly. "It breaks my heart to crowd ye."

"I have given you my word that I have not the paper you wish," said Beth, tremulously.

"You won't give it up?"

"I cannot. I have nothing to give. Oh, believe me!"

That last cry was drawn from her by the sudden change of his sickening grin to a glare of ferocious determination.

"We'll see about that!" he cried, starting toward her.

With a cry of terror and indignation the girl reined her horse sharp round, and dug her spurs into his flanks, with the purpose of riding her enemies down, breaking through their ranks, and making one more dash for liberty.

Her bridle-rein was seized on either side by two of the ruffianly crew, and her horse forced back upon his haunches, despite her fiercest application of the spur.

Old-man Crocker laughed in devilish glee.

"I'm fur ye, my beauty!"

And he reached out to seize her.

With a sharp cry of rage and despair, she eluded him by leaping from the saddle on the opposite side of the horse.

Crocker uttered an angry oath, and was about to pass round the animal in persistent pursuit, when a voice in his rear called him to a halt.

"Drap it, ole man! I've got ye lined!"

Such a challenge as this among such men is always worthy of attention. There is nothing so sharply business-like as a man with his finger on a trigger.

One of the ruffians cried in warning:

"Look out, Cap! He's got his gun on ye!"

Old-man Crocker turned and looked over his shoulder with a stare of astonishment.

Joe Moran had rolled over so as to lie almost on his breast, and on the pole of his litter he held balanced a cocked revolver.

He had not the strength to sustain it at arm's-length in the air, but in this position he could hold it without tax till needed.

In that event he would have to lift it but a few inches to bring it into deadly efficiency, and to that effort he was quite equal.

At sight of this menace, Old-man Crocker uttered an inarticulate roar of rage.

It did not dismay Joe Moran.

"Ye hyear me, Cap!" he said. "I ain't much good, I ain't. I ain't got it in me to pull through

the course o' sprouts as the boys give me, foltered up by your tender nussin'. But a man who hain't got much up on the game kin afford to take long chances. That's what's the matter with me.

"Now, I kin bore you—you know that—an' bore you past doctorin', too—long before you could throw up defenses or the boys could spike my battery.

"Afterwards they might knock the bottom clean out o' this hyar ole colander what Hank Budlong left me to strain through. But then ag'in, they might toss their bats, an' 'low as I'd done the world a sarvice. I'm willin' to resk that. But, either way, you'd be past prayin' fur.

"So I say—drap it! I won't see the lady abused."

Old-man Crocker was nobody's fool. He could appreciate the force of this logic. He knew when he was "down."

But he "let go hard." Preferring force, when that failed he was willing to resort to any more promising means. He would "stoop to conquer," and then salve his hurt dignity with revenge.

While he was casting about for some way out of his dilemma, Beth ran round to the other side of Moran's litter, crying:

"Oh, save me from that ruthless brute, and God will reward you!"

"Waal," sneered Crocker, "this hyar is returnin' a kiss fur a blow! How long is it that you two have been so lovin'? You furgive an' furgit easy. But I will say, Joe, as you take the cake! She didn't git none o' the knife-holes you left in Bob Cady's carcass; an' so, perhaps, she might be expected to give 'em the go-by fur a fine young man. But fur every knife-hole, you've got a slug what's bound to stick by ye. I shouldn't 'low as you'd disremember so easy."

Beth shuddered and shrunk away, horrified by the thought that she had appealed to, and was willing to accept protection from, her lover's murderer.

"She didn't put no bullets into me," answered Moran; "an' ef I did prod Bob Cady full o' holes, so much the more reason I should make it up to his—to her—"

Crocker laughed tauntingly at Moran's stammering.

"Out with it! To his girl! But whose girl is she? She was your girl a spell ago; an' now I'll bet she's Six-foot Si's; an' to-morrer she may be somebody else's."

"That ain't nuther hyar nor thar," said Moran, doggedly. "She'll never belong to you; an' you'll never lay a hand on her while I'm kickin'."

Old-man Crocker scowled like the baffled demon that he was, and paused to measure the situation with his eye.

It is possible that, rather than submit to this discomfiture before the eyes of his men, he might have concluded to risk a bullet, though he knew Joe Moran in health to be a dead-shot.

But just at this critical juncture the attention of all was diverted by the sudden appearance of a man who dashed up at a dead run.

"Cap! Cap!" he cried, as soon as he gained the midst of the gaping crowd, "hyar's the greatest go yit!"

"What now?" demanded Crocker, gruffly, as the fellow stopped to regain breath, for he appeared to have been running swiftly for a great distance.

"It's Dandy Dave!" he gasped.

"Dandy Dave?" roared Crocker, before he could get further.

"You bet! As big as life, an' twice as sassy! He's runnin' Six-foot Si's crowd."

"What! Is Dave standin' in with Six-foot Si?"

"Not much he ain't! He's shoutin' fur Dandy Dave all the while, an' don't you furgit it! He's got Six-foot Si in a hopple—he's got him bad. An' he'll squeeze that thar scriptergram out'n him, ef you don't put in your bid before long."

"But how's he got him? How did he git him? Thar hain't been no fightin'. We'd 'a' byearred it."

In a few words the scout put Old-man Crocker in possession of Dandy Dave's plot as he had overheard it when Dave threw off the mask.

Beth heard of Si's peril with sickening dismay.

Old-man Crocker's rage at learning that his rival had stolen a march on him was unbounded. He set forth at once to circumvent him, only stopping to leave this charge with the guards he placed over his prisoner, whom he thought it well not to take into the fight with him:

"Keep yer eye on Joe Moran, an' ef he tries to let the girl slip, you put a bullet through him—understand?"

Then away, helter-skelter! The rivals were to meet in battle at last!

Beth bowed her head in her hands in mute despair.

"He will be killed—maybe tortured! and all for me!" was the burden of her reflections.

Joe Moran turned, at the expense of many a twinge, as his whitening face showed, so that he could look at her. His gaze was wistful, as if

he longed to have her look up so that he could speak to her. But he said nothing to break in upon her sorrow.

"I wa'n't fitten fur her!" was what he said to himself, again and again.

Both were startled from their self-absorption by a sudden rush, followed by the sounds of a furious combat.

There were no pistol-shots, but a savage hand-to-hand scuffle; and before he had scarcely time to realize what was in progress, Joe Moran found himself menaced by a blood-reeking bowie-knife in the hand of a man who rose from the ground, casting off from him the limp body of the last of the three guards.

They had been sitting close together, amusing themselves with a game of cards. He and his fellows had swooped down upon them like birds of prey falling from mid-air.

Now he stood over Moran, glaring down at him like a madman.

"Held on, pardner!" panted Joe. "I'm purty fur gone as it is—you kin see that with one eye. You don't want me fur nothin'. I ain't in yer way!"

Then a sharp cry from Beth brought the trembling wretch at least a brief respite, by drawing the eye of his assailant across the litter to her.

"Ef she kin only save me now as I saved her a minute ago!" was his quavering aspiration.

CHAPTER XII.

A COWBOY TO ORDER.

AND now (having followed Parson Edwards to his development into Judge Jim Rountree, formerly a rejected lover of Beth Crawford, and now, more madly in love with her than ever, a criminal for her sake) what of his confederate, known as Tom Bolan, but familiarly addressed by him as Jake?

The sight of Beth in the company of Six-foot Si had so inflamed Rountree's passion, that he delegated entirely to his colleague the execution of the business that had directly called them to the far West, giving himself up wholly to the pursuit of Beth.

More than this, in his reluctance to reveal his infatuation to his subordinate, he sent him on his mission imperfectly informed as to the state of affairs at Mulligan's Bend. Otherwise Jake's cooler head would have shown him pitfalls that in his ignorance he was in no condition to discover.

It will be recalled that, having quelched a threatened mutiny, headed by Billy Maddern, arising from his delay in following up the cryptogram, Hank Budlong sent Jimmy Kenney into Mulligan's Bend to reconnoiter; that Six-foot Si fairly kicked Kenney out of camp, with a message to his master to the effect that any superfluous men that he might happen to have would be buried at the Bend, "free, gratis, for nothin'"; that Tom Bolan followed Kenney on his return, captured the sentinel, and marched him into the presence of his chief.

From this point we resume his adventures.

"Waal!" declared Hank Budlong, as he stared at the bold intruder into his camp, "you're a corker, an' no mistake!"

Tom Bolan made a sweeping bow which included all the astonished road-agents, and replied coolly to their leader's ejaculation:

"What's the matter with me? Didn't you invite me to call on you ef I took a notion?"

"I did, as sure as you're born, stranger!"

"Waal, hyar I be!"

"I see you. But what's the trump?"

"Suppose you begin by makin' me feel a little more at home. Hain't you got nothin' to drink? Or perhaps it's the go up in this hyar section to stand a Dutch treat."

The outlaws laughed in chorus. Here was a bold spirit after their own hearts.

"Waal, boss, you call me loud," said Budlong, good-naturedly. "But ef whisky'll do ye, I reckon we kin fix ye out. Tip the dimijohn fur the gentleman, Bart."

"To the good health o' the champion!" shouted he who had been so enthusiastic over the issue of Bolan's mill with Billy Maddern.

The hearty yell with which the toast was drank showed that there were more of his way of feeling, and the proposer followed it up with:

"You hain't thought better o' your stand-off, Cap? You hain't concluded to take up with that pardnership?"

"Not at this season o' the year," answered Bolan, coolly.

"I'm obleeged to you all the same," responded his imperturbable admirer.

While the crowd began to chaff the fellow for these persistent overtures, Bolan turned to the chief.

"Waal, boss," he said, briskly, "I'm hyar on business."

"It looks like it," answered Budlong, "by the way you knocked at the front door."

The sentinel whom he had marched in ahead of him had taken advantage of the centering of interest in the intruder to slip away and return to his post.

"That shows," responded Bolan, "that I hain't got no time to fool away on ceremony."

"Drive ahead, then. I'm waitin' on ye."

"I don't do my business with no under-strap-pers. Ef you chaps hain't got no man to represent ye—"

"Ef you're wantin' to see me private—"

"That's what I'm after, boss."

"Good enough! Step this way."

Budlong led the way a little apart from the fire about which his men were congregated.

"Now swing yer bower," he said, when they were out of earshot.

"I've got a mite of a job on hand," began Bolan, "an' it struck me that you chaps might be willin' to let yerselves out fur a spell."

"Fur how long?"

"Fur a matter o' ten days or a fortnight, maybe."

"Waal, that jest depends. What is thar in it?"

Then followed a game of dickering, at which Bolan proved himself quite as good as at holding up his "dukes."

Finally, the matter disposed of, Billy Maddern was called for.

He went with a puzzled look, wondering what further the man who had knocked him out could want with him.

"Boss," was Bolan's greeting, "I've took a notion to you—I have so."

Still more astonished, anything like this seeming so uncharacteristic of the speaker, Maddern replied warily:

"I hope I hain't give you no cause to take a dislikin' to me."

"Not much! I liked the way you stood to the scratch."

"I give you the best I had, stranger."

"I believe you. An' a man may go through the world with his dukes up, an' git more that ain't so good than that's better."

This was an unquestionable compliment, and Maddern's face began to relax.

He knew a good man when he saw him, and his experience with Bolan had satisfied him that, whoever he might be, he was a judge of the "fistic art."

"Waal, what do ye want o' me now?" he asked.

Bolan looked over him critically, coolly asking him to turn so that the light from the fire would illuminate his face.

"I reckon you'll do, with a mite o' makin' up."

"What'll I make up fur?"

"Was you ever a cowboy?"

"You bet!"

"Ah! that's what I wanted to hear."

Instantly Maddern assumed a wary air.

"Hold on, bo s! You ain't lookin' fur me fur nothin'?"

"If I was layin' fur you, pard, you bet yer sweet life I wouldn't come at you in no sich shape as this. The first thing you'd hear, would be somethin' drap!"

"I hain't byearred nothin' o' no account yit!" said Maddern, rather testily.

He was evidently annoyed at the other's coolness. He didn't let any man play with him.

"Keep yer shirt on!" advised Bolan, not at all disturbed by any little bristling on the part of the man whom he was handling as suited him. "I've been dickering with your head-center for the use of your gang fur a few days, an' you struck me as the man fur a place that every Tom, Dick an' Harry wouldn't be able to fill."

This was brushing the right way of the fur again, and Maddern felt better.

"You may find a better man than me," he conceded, modestly, "but all you kin ask of a man is to do his best."

"That'll suit me. Kin you git the rig of a cowboy? It'll have to pass muster before eyes that know what a cowboy is."

"I was a cowboy fur seven year, an' I kin rag out to the life."

"Good enough! An' now, as thar ain't nothin' fur the boss in the work I'll lay out fur you, ef his time is worth anythin' to him elsewhar, he kin take a walk."

At first Hank Budlong stared at this cool dismissal. Then he laughed with amazement.

"Waal," he declared, "it ain't long sence you had your cheek half-sole—a double half-sole at that, hemlock-tanned an' spiked with hobnails."

"I always do my business with the man that does the work. Then he gits his orders at first hand, an' ef thar's any botchin' o' the job, it lays between us. That's my way. Ef you don't like it, you kick, an' I git somebody else."

There could be no question as to the business-like methods of Mr. Tom Bolan. Hank Budlong swore with a blending of annoyance and amusement, but he let him have his way.

"Oh! play yer own game. So long as you come down with the rocks when it's my call, that's all I want out o' ye."

"The bank's responsible when you've got any chips to cash, Cap!"

Then, as Budlong turned away, the cool intruder called after him:

"So long!"

His first question to Maddern was:

"Do you know an Overland wagon-boss by the name of Cap. Collins?"

"Nary wagon-boss."

"Did you ever hear o' Bareback Buck?"

"I've heard of him, but I never see him."

"What's more to the purpose is, do you 'low as he ever seen you?"

"I reckon not. Most likely I'd 'a' knowed it, ef he was ever around whar I was. He's a lightnin' sport, by all accounts, an' makes a noise wharever he goes."

"Waal, I reckon we'll have to chance it. If anybody drops to you, we'll have to throw up this hand, an' try a new deal."

Then followed a long and evidently careful course of instructions.

At its close Bolan asked:

"Thar! Do you reckon you kin put that thing through in shape?"

As he was made to understand what was expected of him, Maddern's face had brightened with interest. He now answered with an air of confidence:

"Boss, I'll give you, like I done before, the best I've got!"

"I shall be on hand so's you kin git word to me ef anythin' unexpected turns up. An' now, the sooner we git at it, the better our chances will be."

"Lead off! I'm with ye."

When Maddern had provided himself with a cowboy outfit, from *riata* to sheepskin breeches, he looked and acted the character to the life.

To prove his fitness for it, he performed some striking feats at riding and throwing the lasso, to Bolan's great satisfaction.

Then away to the southward, skirting the boundless prairie in the shadow of the foothills.

At a signal from Bolan they changed their course toward the east, striking boldly out into the plains.

Now they rode with ever increasing caution, following the watercourses so as to blend their figures with the trees and never allow them to be outlined against the sky.

Their sharp lookout on every side was at last, after several days of unremitted vigilance, rewarded by the sight of a wagon-train.

"Thar they be!" cried Bolan. "Now everythin' depends on how you carry yerself. Go over the hull thing, an' let me see ef you know it."

Maddern complied, and acquitted himself creditably.

"Good! good!" cried Bolan. "The next thing is to put yerself in shape. You've got six hours to knock the spots out o' that boss. I want to see you before you go in. You git back hyar by sundown. I'll wait right whar I be. Now git! an' good luck go with ye."

The two rascals shook hands, and then Maddern forded the stream where they were, and coursed away over the prairie to northward, as if all the furies of Tartarus were after him.

At sundown he returned, his horse reeking with sweat and bedraggled with mud, and well-nigh spent with exhaustion.

"He's a beauty!" exclaimed Bolan, in delight. "They'll never drop to your leetle game."

"I'll drop myself!" cried Maddern, casting himself upon the ground as if he too were half-dead from the painful ordeal through which he had passed. "Thar ain't a bone in my body but's hangin' to its neighbors by shreds."

"So much the better!" declared Bolan. "If you put the hull thing through like this, it's all I ask. I 'lowed I knowed you when I picked you out."

"But thar! we hain't no time fur foolishness. You make a dead break fur that thar train, an' go fur 'em fur all you're worth!"

"You may dock me ten dollars fur an hour's sleep!"

"I'll give you ten dollars, an' more too, above what I promised you; but I won't let ye sp'ile this half-day's work. You may sleep as much as you like after you strike that wagon-train, but you don't do no sleepin' before."

Maddern rose wearily, with his companion's assistance. Then into the saddle and away once more.

So the night closed in around these two scoundrels, and the working of their infamous plot was begun.

CHAPTER XIII. THE WAGON TRAIN.

OVER the boundless prairie a wagon-train dragged its sinuous length, like a great serpent. Leaning away from each other, the sleepy oxen swayed slowly along, the wheels of the tilted wagons sinking into the prairie loam so as to give them a dead pull, whether going up or down the billowy swells.

Behind, the stock were driven by herders who lolled lazily in the saddle, leaving the work principally to a dog which seemed to have solved the problem of perpetual motion, whether it was that his bark ran his legs, or his legs ran his barker.

In advance rode a man of powerful build, with a frank, fearless countenance, accompanied by two boys, who rode on either side, and kept him busy answering their questions and listening to a running fire of remarks on whatever came into their heads.

The man was Captain Collins; the boys—of

seventeen and fourteen respectively—were Cass and Mart Crawford, Beth's brothers, whom she believed to be yet east of the Missouri.

"Shall we camp by that stream to-night, Captain Collins?" asked Cass, and pointing to a line of trees which loomed on the horizon which they were approaching.

"I reckon," answered the wagon-master. "Hark away, an' see if thar's a good ford anywhar along thar."

Cass had been on this errand before, in their long tramp across the plains, and nothing pleased him better than to feel that he was allowed to have a voice in determining the direction of the train.

But Mart too, though less daring than his brother in a moment of danger, liked to have a hand in this matter, and if he was lucky enough to find the ford that was afterward decided upon it was a feather in his cap for days.

With a challenging yell Cass put spurs to his horse, and dashed away.

With an answering shout Mart was at his heels.

Captain Collins laughed with the hearty enjoyment of a good-natured man, as he called encouragingly after the younger racer.

Away over the prairie they skimmed, and were soon riding among the trees along the river bank.

Presently Cass came out into the open again, swinging his hat and yelling in triumph.

He looked to see if his brother had made a rival discovery, and sent a jeering yell in quest of him.

As if in acceptance of the challenge, Mart came dashing from the cover, wild with exultation, to make his horse gallop in a circle while he fired his revolver several times in rapid succession.

For a moment Cass hesitated in silence, and then putting spurs to his horse, sped away to where his younger brother still voiced his challenging shouts.

Riding in among the trees, he examined the ford, and then reappeared, to summon the train to this point as heartily as if he had found it himself.

"Thar's a generous youngster!" exclaimed Captain Collins, heartily, to a man who had ridden up to his side, to watch the boys with amused interest. "He caves to the kid, when he's down, without no ifs nor buts."

The person addressed was a younger man, dressed in a full suit of buckskin, fringed at the seams and ornamented elsewhere so as to give him a most picturesque look.

He was armed with a repeating-rifle and revolvers of high finish, and bestrode a coal-black horse, of noble appearance, without saddle or bridle.

No one who saw him needed to be told that this was Bareback Buck.

He had been riding beside one of the wagons, in gay converse with a laughing girl, whose rare beauty of feature could not be hidden by the sun-bonnet she wore, while her supple figure defied the plainest of calico gowns to disguise its lovely contours.

Well might she be so happy that the sun in all his daily round was never greeted by a more smiling face; for every one in her little world loved Rose Crawford, and most of all this gallant Bareback Buck, whom she veritably believed to be without a peer between the two oceans!

When he was bantering her, she was coquettishly pert, giving him as good as he sent; but when he turned away, a shy light would come into her divinely blue eyes, as they followed him with a look that would have brought his heart into his throat if he had seen it.

She had the rare combination of gold-blond hair, with darker brows and eyelashes, and lips of vivid scarlet, while the delicate rose color, instead of lying dead in her cheeks, came and went with the ebb and flow of her animation in speech.

She was too full of bounding health to have the bleached-out look that is apt to attend the blonde style, nor was there any languid indecision in her movements or voice.

Meanwhile, Bareback Buck had ridden forward to decide upon the ford which Mart had found, and as he approved and the sun was well-nigh set, the train went into corral a quarter of a mile out in the open, to guard against the chance of any skulking devils creeping upon them in the night.

One by one the wagons were brought up so as to form a circular inclosure within which the camp-fire was built. Then the stock were driven to water, and back to the immediate vicinity of the corral, to graze in the care of vigilant watchers, where they could be secured within the inclosure in case of an attack.

The evening scene was a bustling and merry one. Though the older people were weary with the long day's jaunt, and glad to rest, yet there were young and volatile spirits that would not be repressed till they had repaid themselves for the day's work with the evening hour of pleasure.

Even before the supper was fairly dispatched, the agonizing wail and squeak of a long-suffering

fiddle awoke a spasmodic restlessness in more than one nimble leg, and a merry circle was laughing at the calf-like grace of a herder, who was executing a grotesque side shuffle and accompanying his antics with an Injun:

"Hoi! hoi! hoi! hoi!"

At another point an excited party were gathered about the rear end of one of the wagons, talking all at once and very loudly, and it must be admitted now and then letting slip a word "as they shouldn't orter."

What this pother was about was soon apparent, when all retreated from the wagon, leaving a silver half-dollar supported against the tail-board on two pins, a blanket being spread on the ground beneath it.

The party separated on either side, leaving a clear space, at the end of which, ten or twelve feet from the wagon, stood a young fellow with his belt full of bowie-knives.

There was nothing handsome about Bowieknife 'Bijah. His faded yellow hair was decidedly candle-wicky, while the fuzzy down on cheeks and chin did not better the gawky expression of his features. People who did not know him invariably laughed at him for an overgrown hobbledoy; but those who knew him best respected him most highly, even if they did not particularly admire his peculiar style of beauty.

He had lounged about, round-shouldered and shuffling; but when he took his position, the whole man changed.

He drew his figure erect, his face took on a new expression, and when he drew a knife from his belt and poised it to throw, his attitude was one of undoubted dignity and even grace.

"Look—look!" cried an eager voice. "'Bijah is going to show those fellows how to handle a bowie!"

"'Bijah! oh, 'Bijah! wait! I want to see that!"

And out from the shadow of one of the wagons fluttered a female figure with the fleetness of a fawn.

'Bijah let his hand drop to his side, and turned with a look which could not, by his best friend, be called otherwise than sheepish.

It was a very broad look, measuring from tip to tip—his mouth. It was an unquestionably delighted one, if you took the expression of his eyes as the standard.

But who would not consent to look foolish in the eyes of all the world else, for the delight of having Rose Crawford call out to him so in that musical soprano, and run to his side with so bewitching a smile of expectant admiration?

Out from the shadow of the wagon whence she had appeared came another figure, following more slowly than she sped before.

It was a much finer figure than 'Bijah's in every way, but its owner didn't seem content with this advantage.

When Rose glanced back over her shoulder at him with a mocking smile, it made her eyes dance with malicious delight to note the contraction of his brows.

"Oh, I want to bet!" she cried gayly, looking about on the bronzed masculine faces that reflected her smile, with a make-weight of admiration thrown in.

"I'll take the bet, either way, or both!" shouted an individual who seldom let sentiment or personal prejudice blind an unusually shrewd perception of a safe place to put a stake.

But now it was plain that he was quite reckless.

"I'll bet you two to one, anythin' you've a mind to make it!" he urged, pressing eagerly forward.

But there were others who were not behind him. Rose was besieged.

"Wait! wait!" she laughed. "I can't bet you all! Do you think I own a gold mine, with a vein of virgin ore a foot thick and a mile long? You great fellows are trying to—to break me!"

And she laughed merrily at the slang she permitted herself.

"I'll lend you my pile, an' ef they clean us out, I'll be happy still!" cried one who knew how to turn a compliment cleverly, if he was dressed in anything but courtly attire.

He was rewarded for his wit and gallantry with a sparkle of the eye and a shake of the head that made him feel satisfied with himself.

All this put considerably more life into Bareback Buck's movements, and he hastened forward, to interpose:

"I'll cover your pile, whatever it is."

But Rose Crawford was altogether too clever a coquette to submit tamely to this assertion of proprietorship.

"Oh, no you won't!" she laughed. "I'm going to bet with Captain Collins, ain't I? You'll bet with me, won't you, ca tain?"

And she slipped her hand through his arm coaxingly.

"Bet with you!" cried the captain, gayly. "You better believe I will! I'll bet you two kisses to one that he don't hit it, or three kisses to two that he does."

"Not if it takes two to make a bet!" declared Rose, with mock petulance taking her hand from his arm. "You're worse than the rest of them. You grow wicked as you grow old!"

"But then"—with a sudden thought, her eyes sparkling with mischief—"on second thought, I don't know but I'll take you up. If you win, I'll give you an order on a certain lady of our acquaintance who is owing me several."

Everybody laughed at this allusion to a widow to whom Captain Collins was known to be very gallant.

"You minx!" he cried, making an effort to catch her which she eluded, "I mean to bet on the losing side—then I'll have you! An' you'd better believe I always pay my debts, with interest!"

"I'm glad to hear that," she retorted. "Several of the boys insist that I owe them some forfeits that have been standing a long time. If you lose, I'll get you to pay up these bad debts."

She had him again, and the captain acknowledged the corn.

"Now," she went on, "if you will bet fair, I'll go you fifty cents that he cuts it in two within a quarter of an inch of the middle. That will give you a chance, for you know that nobody else could come anywhere near it."

"You rascal! You're tryin' to git a dead open-an'-shut on your side, now! If I lose, I pay; but if you lose, you let it stand on account, like them other debts o' your's."

"Oh, no! I always bet fair. Here's the money down."

And she held out the coin in her rosy palm.

Then with the challenging little laugh with which she always accompanied a slang expression, she added:

"Put up, or—"

But, as if this were a little too pronounced, she left the rest to inference.

The captain covered her stake, and she slipped both into her pocket, saying that she might as well appropriate them at once, since she was sure to win.

"And now, 'Bijah, if you make me lose my money, I'll never forgive you!"

"I'll do the best I kin, Miss Rosy," declared 'Bijah, crimsoning with pleasure to the roots of his hair.

A moment he poised the knife in the air, and then it flew like an arrow straight for the mark.

"Done! done!" cried Rose, excitedly, springing forward.

The two halves of the coin had fallen upon the blanket, while the bowie remained quivering in the tail-board.

Upon being placed one on the other, it was found that the dexterous cast had diverged scarcely an eighth of an inch from its aim.

"To the victors belong the spoils!" quoted Rose, coolly appropriating the trophy, after the manner of sprightly young beauties who are in the habit of doing pretty much as they please. "'Bijah, you and I are the victors, so one half goes to you, and the other to me. It isn't a split sixpence, mind you!" she added, slyly.

Despite his looks, which were against him, 'Bijah was not so dull as to fail to understand this allusion, and blushing redder than ever at his own daring, he answered:

"I'd rather have a split half dollar with you, Miss Rosy, than a split sixpence with anybody else."

"Hear him! hear him!" shouted Cap. Collins, bursting with laughter. "Ain't our 'Bijah a gay lover? You'd better look out, Buck, or he'll git away with ye, ole man!"

Though the others laughed boisterously at this joke, Miss Rose ignored it, manifesting a great interest in a further exhibition of 'Bijah's skill.

He vindicated her faith in him by throwing the rest of the knives in his belt in rapid succession, and planting them in the tail-board in a row, so close together that their hafts almost touched.

Soon the evening's relaxation was over, and the camp slept.

At midnight Bowie-knife 'Bijah relieved the guard whose post was to the eastward, looking back over the trail.

'Bijah lay flat on the ground, with his chin resting on his folded hands. In this posture he could see the crest of the next swell outlined against the sky, so that no object, even so big as a prairie dog, could approach him undetected.

For a long time he lay, watching the quivering stars, and listening to the low noises that came from the camp behind him, when suddenly he became conscious of a different sound, which, the moment he fixed his attention upon it, he made out to be the regular thud of a horse's hoofs approaching from the east.

His rifle lay so that he had only to rest his weight upon his elbows, and bring it to his shoulder, when he was ready to challenge any intruder.

He had not long to wait, for the unknown came on without hesitancy, though at a heavy walk in which 'Bijah's quick ear detected the gait of an exhausted horse.

Presently the double figure of horse and rider loomed on the crest of the swell, and then came the challenge of the watchful sentinel.

"Halt! Who goes thar? Hands up!"

Obedient to the word of command, the horse was pulled up, and the shadowy rider lifted his hands above his head, at the same time calling:

"Hallo, stranger! Thank God, this hyar's the wagon-train at last! You hain't no call to be afeard o' me. I ain't got the fight of a mouse left in me. All I'm after is a place whar I kin lay down an' snooze once more, without havin' to git my topknot glued on ag'in in the mornin'."

"Who air you, an' whar do you come from?"

"I'm a played-out white man, pard; an' I've come from havin' the legs run mighty nigh off o' my ole gal by a batch o' p'ison Sioux."

"Stay whar you be, an' we'll have somebody hyar in a minute to see ef that thar's so."

'Bijah whistled a signal which called assistance without rousing the camp.

A moment later several crouching figures came loping through the prairie grass, with rifles at a trail.

"What's the row, pardner?" asked Bareback Buck, for it was seldom that any one was ahead of him in time of need.

"A white man out yon, accordin' to his own account, as has been chased by Injuns."

"I'm onto him. Is that you, Cap?"

There was a low response from the foremost of several who came up, and by tacit understanding the men separated into two parties, one moving off to the northward, and one southward.

"Take yer time, pard," called the applicant for hospitality. "But don't fergit that my arms is like lead, an' my nerve's turnin' to water!"

'Bijah made no reply, but a moment later the stranger felt, rather than saw, a shadowy figure rise at his side as if out of the ground, and a voice said:

"All right, stranger. You push ahead into camp at your own gait."

"That sounds mighty good, boss, after the Sioux gallopade I've been dancin' to. But in the mean time have you got a toothful o' eye-water fur a faintin' Christian?"

"I don't sleep with my canteen on me, pard; but I reckon we kin give you somethin' to brace you up when we git to the wagons, ef you're so fur gone as you let on."

The stranger heaved a sigh, and urged his horse to resume his labored walk.

Reaching the corral, he slid from the saddle heavily, leaving his horse with his head hanging almost to the ground, plainly dead beat.

Staggering into the inclosure, he cast himself down by the fire, rolled upon his back, and threw his arms over his head, with a sigh of relief.

"Gents," he said, looking up at the group who gathered about him, "ef you'll give me a pull at the bottle, an' a mite o' grub later on, I'll take a snooze kindly, an' we'll talk the thing over in the mornin'."

They gave him the drink, and looking up gratefully as he handed the canteen back, he added:

"If some kind mortal has it in him to give my hoss a mite of a rub-down, I reckon it'll be a godsend to him."

And as his head sunk back, his eyes rolled upward, and their lids closed heavily. He was asleep.

This was Billy Maddern's entrance among those who were to be the victims of his treachery.

CHAPTER XIV.

MADDERN GETS A POINT.

In the morning Billy Maddern gave a plausible account of his pursuit by the Indians, the condition of himself and his horse being sufficient corroboration to prevent his entertainers from suspecting that all might not be as it appeared.

He told his story while eating with an appetite which of itself was enough to convince the spectators that he had not seen food since, as he said, he was obliged to abandon his pack-mule two days before.

"They're a p'ison lot!" he concluded with a laugh, "but I'm ahead o' the game yet. I've had the hide of one o' 'em fur every hoss or mule they ever got out o' me, an' I'll have another, before I'm through, fur that 'un. Better luck next time!"

He was going up into the mines to try his luck again, he said, being tired of bull-whacking. He had made two or three fair strikes in his time, but it was his experience that the dust all went the same way, whether one made it with the pick and pan, or in the saddle.

"But variety's the spice o' life; an' thar's heaps o' things whar hain't got so much fun in 'em as stampedin' fur new diggin's, an' now an' ag'in believin' you're goin' to be a bonanza king, till yer luck peter's cut, an' you're no-whar!"

Cap. Collins made him heartily welcome to continue with his train as long as he felt that he needed the protection of numbers.

Billy proved to be an agreeable accession to the party. No one could tell a brighter story, or sing a better song. If he could be believed, his life had been one long series of hairbreadth escapes.

The knowing ones took these stories with a modicum of salt, conceding "Chinny Charley's" talents as a romancer—for Chinny Charley had been dubbed within twenty-four hours of his self-introduction as Charley Bings.

He had two intent listeners, at least—Rose Crawford and Bowie-knife 'Bijah.

It was but a day or two after Chinny Charley joined the train that Rose startled Bareback Buck by abruptly remarking:

"I suppose you have killed a lot of men, too."

She looked at him with eyes rather wider open than usual, but there was nothing in the expression of her face to indicate whether she would be pleased or horrified to learn that his life had been full of carnage.

"Eh!" he ejaculated with a stare of surprise. "What put such an idea into your head? Why should I have killed a lot of men?"

"Don't all of you wild fellows do that?" she asked.

Then he laughed.

"No. Some of us are very tame specimens indeed. Our thirst for gore is fully satisfied with bloodying the other fellow's nose."

"And do you mean to tell me—"

"That I haven't the blood of a single fellow mortal on my conscience. I would cut a poor figure beside Chinny Charley, for instance."

And he laughed again.

"You can't tease me!" she declared, with a pretty pout. "I believe every word he says!"

"Well, that's only fair. He furnishes the whisky and you furnish the jug."

"With big ears, I suppose you mean!"

"Oh, no! If I had thought of that, I should have said— Well, probably I'd have left it unsaid. I only meant that it would be hard to ask him to tell stories and believe them too."

"You only say that because you are envious of him."

"Suppose," suggested Buck, dropping his voice to the stage whisper of the villain in a melodrama, "I slay the hero of all of these adventures that make the chills run so delightfully up and down one's back? That will prove me a more terrible fellow than he, when I want to be, and—"

"If you say another word, Mister—"

"I have quite lost my voice! The flash of your eyes has frightened it out of me. But some morning before breakfast I'll kill a road-agent or two and half a dozen Injuns for you if that is the road to your affections."

She clapped her hands over her ears, and turned to run away from him and join a group where Chinny Charley was holding forth to a rapt audience.

But with a stride he caught her, drew her back in the shadow of the wagon, and sunk upon one knee with his arms about her waist, murmuring:

"Rose, my darling!"

In the olden days of savagery, our ancestors used to secure their brides by capture; and a bold lover is never at a disadvantage even in this crowning era of civilization.

During the weeks of daily companionship in which they had been crossing the Great Plains, Bareback Buck had never put his love in words. But now he took possession of her as a matter of course; and she did not question his right, but, after a momentary struggle, prompted by instinctive maiden coyness, remained trembling, submissive in his embrace.

If he was not a slayer of men, she was sure that he had proved equal to every occasion that had arisen in his life, and she believed that he had done many wonderful things that he was too modest to boast about.

If Buck had entertained any fears of rivalry from Chinny Charley, and it is possible that something of the kind had precipitated his declaration, they were dispelled in a moment. He was surprised and delighted to see how complete was his conquest over the little beauty who was fluttering in his arms.

After that she listened to Chinny Charley's narratives with interest, but slyly observant of their reception by experienced plains and mountain-men.

These listened as they smoked with the utmost gravity, and when their turn came tried to hold their own in competition with the versatile Bings.

'Bijah and the other young emigrants, to whom all this life of wild adventure was wonderful and fascinating, drank in these stories with a gullibility that appeared in their gaping mouths and glistening eyes.

"'Bijah," said Rose, "do you intend to take to killing people when we get out in the mountains, like these fellows?"

"They'd better not go to cuttin' up rusty with me, or you, Miss Rosy, or the boys," replied 'Bijah, shaking his head defiantly.

"But do you suppose that this is all so, that Chinny Charley and the rest of them have been telling us?"

"Eh?" ejaculated 'Bijah, his jaw dropping with astonishment.

"I've been trying to keep count of the numbers these manslayers of ours have sent out of the world. Have you stopped to think of that?"

"Waal, no, I reckon not," admitted 'Bijah, scratching his head dubiously. "How many is it?"

"Enough so that if a few more such blood-thirsty fellows as we have with us were turned loose, they would soon exterminate all of the Indians and road-agents, and in fact one an-

other. Then there would be no one left to tell the harrowing tale!"

And she burst out laughing.

'Bijah stared at her in bewilderment, till both were startled by a laugh joining in with hers.

It was not so silvery, by a long way; and even before they turned in their saddles they knew that Chinny Charley had ridden up behind, near enough to overhear what had passed between them.

Rose flushed with some embarrassment, and 'Bijah looked as if he was ready to champion her cause if the cowboy chose to take exception to her criticism.

But nothing was further from Chinny Charley's disposition.

He rode up abreast on the other side of Rose, declaring boldly:

"I like you; I do, fur a fact! An' now, ef you don't believe my stories, it's only fair that you should tell me some of your own."

"And give you the chance to get even with me by doubting them?" laughed Rose, quickly.

If Maddern had known her thoroughly well, he could not have approached Rose more cleverly than he had done.

'Bijah's eyes flashed with resentment at his boldness; but far from taking offense, the girl saw in it only the bluff frankness of a man whose life had been passed on the breezy prairies where the masquerading of society is unknown.

As has been said, a fearless fellow, who is not impertinent, is never at a disadvantage with a pretty girl.

"Doubt you?" cried Maddern. "I never doubt a woman—only one thing," he added, as if by an afterthought.

"And what's that?"

"When she says no."

Rose instantly challenged him out of her laughter.

"Then you have heard them say no?"

But Maddern parried this thrust by an evasion.

"The prettiest of 'em are apt to begin that way."

"That isn't quite to the point, sir," she answered. "But I won't press for anything more decisive, since a man isn't bound to tell anything to his own disadvantage."

"In love or law," added Maddern. "That's a lucky thing for both kinds of rascals. You have to find us out the best you kin. But thar we're in as bad a fix as you, if we can't git you to tell us what we want to know."

"If you mean that for me, it don't fit; for I'd have you know that I am the personification of frankness!"

"I have never a doubt of it. That's the reason I asked you."

There was a merry twinkle in his eye; and he added, as if this were only for talk's sake, rather than from any serious curiosity:

"If you'll sing a song, we'll let you off from the story. That's the rule in camp."

"Thank you for the option," said Rose, quite misled by his bantering air, "but I think I prefer the story."

"You'll please me in pleasin' yourself. Everybody may hyar ye sing, but it's between two of us at least to hyar ye tell about yerself; an' if I may say so, that's one more than I'd choose, if ye left it to me."

"But the rest know all about it already," declared Rose, with a toss of her head meant to tell him that his gallantry was uncalled for.

However, he was not to be discouraged, but with an Irishman's readiness said:

"Ye couldn't, then, tell me somethin' that they don't know?"

"I could, but I don't care to!" answered Rose, with a touch of the pertness of a spoiled beauty.

Maddern looked as if he wanted to say that that was one of the no's he had spoken of; but if so, he restrained the impulse, and answered, with mock humility:

"Small favors thankfully received, an' large ones in proportion!"

"And it isn't because I like to talk about myself," added Rose, in a way that left it just possible to make a personal application of this, "but perhaps you can tell me something that I want to know."

"Well! I'm in better luck than I thought," cried Maddern, with a brightening of the face and an eager expectancy that ought to go far to placate any piqued beauty.

Rose's returning smile showed that a well-turned compliment was no more distasteful to her than to any of Eve's daughters.

"I haven't anything heroic to boast of," she began. "In fact, my part in the story consists altogether in running away. But there's a villain in it, and that's something."

"I should say so!" laughed Maddern. "That's half of every story."

"And what's the other half, if you know so well?"

"The better-lookin' feller that they run away with."

"I didn't run away with a better-looking fellow!" cried Rose, with a quick flush of indignation.

"That's yer brother," suggested Maddern, in

a soothing tone, but with a twinkle in his eye. "Show me the villain that he ain't better lookin' than."

"I guess I'd better leave you to tell the rest of the story yourself, you're so clever at it," laughed Rose.

"But I've told all I know of it," protested Maddern. "An' anybody could guess so much—that thar was a villain in it, if thar was a pretty girl. But what kind of a villain? That's the first thing."

"This villain was a wicked guar—"

But Rose broke off abruptly, and glanced at Bowie-knife 'Bijah.

"Don't spare the ole man," said 'Bijah. "He's a tough 'un, as everybody knows."

"I wasn't thinking of him," said Rose. "He wouldn't have done anything if he hadn't been set on. But the villain is a scoundrelly judge, and there is no mitigation of his rascality. It is from his persecution that I have had to fly, with 'Bijah, here, and my brothers."

"To make a regular story of it, I suppose I ought to tell you how he sent Jake Fogg, a miserable tool of his, after us, and how we escaped him with the help of Bareback Buck and Captain Collins. But as I'm not much of a story-teller, I'll pass over that, and go on to the main point, which is that we are on our way to join my sister, Beth Crawford, at—"

"Beth Crawford?" cried Maddern, with a start.

"Yes. Do you know her?"

Maddern was staring at her blankly, saying to himself:

"Bang me over the head fur a stupid jack-ass! Of course that's what he said—Crawford! An' I understood him Crofoot, an' never tumbled. Whew! hyar's a go! An' what'll Hank say? But how could he have this hyar thing poked right under his nose, an' him never drop to it—that's what I want to know. Maybe he knows what he's about, though. The 'coon's layin' low. But he might 'a' let me in."

All this passed through his brain like a flash, and he almost instantly recovered himself.

"Her? No," he answered. "But I knowed Cap'n Jack Crawford. I reckon, now, he might be some o' your folks."

"No," replied Rose. "I have no one but my sister. And what I wanted to ask you was, whether you ever happened to run across a man by the name of Robert Cady."

"Cady?—Bob Cady? No, I never seen him, though I've hyeared tell of him. I useter run with an ole side-pard o' his'n, five or six year ago. Pore ole Catlin—Pat Cat we useter call him—he's gone up the flume, an' he went up howlin'. Thar was worse side-pards than Cat, a heap!"

And though in truth he had never seen Pat Catlin, Maddern shook his head as regretfully as if he were paying an affectionate tribute to an old comrade.

"If you'll remind me about it some time, I'll tell ye a story about Catlin; an' it's a good one, too. But you will excuse me fur breakin' in on what you was sayin'."

"That's all," said Rose. "In order to find my sister Beth, we have only to find Robert Cady. He is to be her husband, if she isn't married to him by this time. The last news we had from her was that she had heard of him at a place called Coyote, and was about to set out to join him there."

"What! Coyote? Why, I'm goin' within a stone's-throw o' thar now."

"It is because I heard you speak of the place that I thought I'd ask you whether you know Mr. Cady."

"Oh, yes! Coyote, an' Mulligan's Bend, an' Gridley's Bar—I'd orter know them ole burghs. I was all through that thar section last winter, an' I told the boys then, that when I was through my contract, I would come an' put in a spell with 'em. But I reckon Cady wa'n't around thar then. I didn't see him."

"But is that all o' yer story?"

"Yes. It isn't much of a story, after one of you hair-raisers. But it has one merit. It's short."

"You might 'a' made it longer. It seems to me that you left out the most interestin' part."

"What part?"

"You didn't tell us what the villain was doin' to ye."

"I didn't forget it. I didn't care to tell."

Maddern glanced at the girl inquiringly, to be surprised at her suddenly brightened color, while, strange to say, Bowie-knife 'Bijah too betrayed signs of embarrassment.

"Waal, hyar's a go!" he reflected. "What's that lout to do with it?"

But he had the good sense not to press the matter.

Meanwhile, he was better content with what he had learned than Rose had any reason to suspect.

"It don't matter what the judge was doin' to her," he reflected. "But it'll be queer if Hank don't turn her too good account when he gits his flippers onto her. She'll be a windfall to the lot of us, if he only plays her right. To the deuce with Jake Fogg! Well throw off on him in a way he'll despise!"

That evening, around the camp-fire, Mart

Crawford asked him to tell the story about Pat Cat.

Rose was among the listeners, and it was evident that she had told her brother, and got him to make the request.

CHAPTER XV.

CHINNY CHARLEY SPINS A YARN.

"WAAL," said Maddern, looking with an inquiring smile about upon those in the circle who were not included among the "tenderfeet," "thar'd orter be some in this hyar crowd as has hyeared tell of ole Pat Catlin."

"Hyar's one, whether or no," answered a weather-bronzed old mountain-man between two puffs of his pipe.

"It was a big strike he made jest five year ago this spring."

"I wish't I had the half of it!"

"Thar was more as wished that same."

"I'll bet you! It made a power of a stir at the time. But he's dead, an' we're livin'. One can't have all the luck."

"An' do you know how he passed out?"

"He died in bed, of a fever, so they say."

"True enough. But what of his side pard, Tommy Rand?"

"Why, the Injuns scooped him in."

"Did they, though?"

"Didn't they?"

"Waal, that's as the story goes. An' that reminds me that it ain't so much about Pat Cat as about Tommy Rand."

"Let's have it, whichever it is."

"Waal, hyar goes!"

"Ye see, Pat Cat, an' Tommy Rand, an' Little Mallagy, an' Jack Montague, they made about as big a four as anybody'd want to tackle. They always hung together ag'in' the world, an' ef one of 'em got down on his luck, he'd git word to his pards, an' then you couldn't phase him till you'd scooped in the piles o' the other three. Then they'd borrar, or beg, or steal, an' come at ye ag'in."

"Waal, one night they all went broke in French John's lay-out, an' stood thar lookin' one another in the face, with their pockets hangin' inside-out. Then Pat Cat, he says:

"Boys, this hyar won't do. When'll we be bonanza kings, ef we keep on blowin' in the dust as fast as we git it, this hyar way? I'll tell ye what we've got to do."

"An' what's that?" says Little Mallagy.

"What you'll kick the worst at," says Pat, laughin'. "We've got to swear off gamblin', an' we've got to swear off whisky. Them two goes together like hand an' glove."

"Och, murther in Ireland! yells Little Mallagy. "Would yes be afther killing us intoirely?"

"But Jack Montague says:

"It can't be done, Pat. We'll have to drink with the boys when they ask us; an' you yerself ain't so mean as to refuse to return the compliment."

"We'll not drink," says Pat, "an' we'll not gamble! When Pat Cat puts his foot down, I reckon most o' the boys knows it's thar."

"It's drink, or fight," says Jack, as cool as if it didn't matter to him which, so long as the company was agreed.

"Then Tommy Rand takes a hand.

"Hold on, boys," says he. "I've an idee in my head."

"Out with it!" says Pat. "It'll be lonesome in there all by itself."

"We'll neither drink nor fight," says Tommy, "but I'll tell ye what we will do. We'll cut loose from all this, an' go out in the mountains, the four of us. An' we'll never come back till we strike that bonanza. How's that?"

"The rest ketched on to that thar scheme like the small-pox on an Injun buck, all but Little Mallagy. But he'd go with the Four, ef it was through blue blazes; so he says:

"Waal, ef you're bound to throw away all the joys o' life, let's have one more drink to swear off on."

"So they called up the crowd, but the boys swore they'd give 'em a better send-off than that. An' before the night was out, they had 'em stone blind an' howlin'."

"Nobody 'lowed as they'd stand by it when they come round; but they did. French John fitted 'em out in good shape, an' they put out fur rarts unknown."

"What happened after that I got from Tommy Rand himself."

"They had dog's luck all the fall, an' nearly starved to death in the winter, but struck an angel lead in the spring."

"Everythin' was boommin', an' they began to talk about startin' a bank in 'Frisco, when one day Little Mallagy come in from whar he'd gone out on a hunt, lookin' as white as if he'd seen a ghost, an' with his knees a-drummin' the devil's tattoo ag'in' each other."

"Boys," says he, "the jig's up!"

"What's the row now?" says Pat Cat.

"An' Little Mallagy he jest gasps:

"Injuns!"

"An' down he flops all in a heap."

"Ef we hadn't been without whisky too long fur 'em to take him now, I'd 'low as Little Mallagy'd got snakes," says Jack.

"Nonsense!" says Pat. "More belike he's tryin' to skeer us out, so's he kin git to go whar—"

"Gents," says Little Mallagy, "ef I ever git whar thar's white men an' whisky, I'm goin' to go in swimmin' in a bar'l of it! But thar's Injuns out yan, all the same, an' ef you don't freeze to what I say, you'll lose yer ha'r; an' maybe ye will anyhow!"

"They knowed he was in earnest from the start, only men don't like to give in that they've got to pull up stakes, an' shake a mine that's pannin' out a thousand dollars a day. An' that's what they had on their hands, or Tommy Rand's a liar!"

"They knowed when they went into the mountains as they'd have to run the risk of an outbreak, an' as it 'ud ketch 'em in bad shape—only four of 'em by themselves; so they'd hunted up a cave that they had everythin' in, only four little burros that they had to pack their plunder."

"They tied each o' these with his four legs together, like a bunch o' radishes, an' drug 'em in to the cave. But they hadn't time to take in their two strings o' sluice-boxes, an' they was a dead give-away."

"After nightfall Pat Cat sneaked out with Little Mallagy, to see his Injuns; an' he found 'em, you bet! They was a lot o' young bucks as had stopped fur a leetle hunt an' a leetle jerky. But they was on the fight—thar wa'n't no mistake about that. They had only stopped to lay in supplies, an' they was painted up an' havin' a war-dance while Pat was lookin' at 'em."

"Pat 'lowed ef the Big Four would lay low fur a day or two, till the Injuns got their meat smoked, they might pass on, an' leave 'em to their gold-diggin'."

"That would 'a' worked all lovely as fur as the Big Four was concerned; but the next day the Injuns dropped on to 'em, an' then held a matinee in front o' the cave."

"Now you'd better believe them Injuns knowed how to hunt 'a'r, an' it didn't take 'em long to make up their minds as you could smoke a white man out of a hole as easy as you could a 'a'r. So they begun to pile the brush up in front o' the mouth o' that cave, without so much as with yer leave or by yer license."

"The Big Four didn't have to be told that they couldn't stand that; so Pat Cat says:

"Boys, it's make or break."

"An' the sooner we break," says Jack Montague, "the fewer smoked Yankees thar'll be in this hyar section."

"It wouldn't pay to try to calcalate too fur ahead. Everythin' depended on the first jump. If they could break through the Injuns an' run fur their camp, they might git the first pick out o' their hosses, an' then stand some show fur gittin' away. But that was the only show fur 'em. So they left their carbines, an' with a revolver in each hand, crept to the mouth o' the cave."

"Through the branches they could see the red devils puttin' the finishin' touches to the brush pile, while two or three o' 'em was makin' fire; but it never seemed to have entered their heads that the Big Four might rush 'em; so not one o' 'em had his arms ready."

"The boys put their shoulders to the heap, give one ole 'forty-riner shove, an' then jumped out an' scrambled over it an' through it the best they could, yellin' an' poppin' their shootin'-irons right an' left."

"It was a surprise party, an' they broke through the Injun line without gittin' a shot back, though Tommy Rand swears he knows they made some good Injun beef on the way."

"They made straight fur the Injun camp; an' when the red devils dropped to their leetle game, maybe they didn't make Rome howl!"

"A brush-heap is the very dickens to climb even when you kin take yer time to it; but when a lost second means a pound o' lead in yer carcass, more or less, it ain't no hippodrome. So Tommy Rand come off with a sprained knee that left him hoppin'."

"That's how he happened to be at the tail end o' the procession when the boys scudded along a ledge, jest as the Injuns opened up."

"He says he felt as if somebody'd slapped him somewhars—he didn't know jest whar—an' then everythin' seemed to be a long way off, an' the Injun yells died away till they wasn't lohder'n whispers, an' he felt as if he was sailin' through the air, as light as a feather."

"He knowed what that meant, an' he says he had jest one idee—to cheat 'em out of his scalp ef he could. Not that it would do him any good, fur he 'lowed as he was a goner; but thar was some satisfaction in worryin' 'era. So he gives a dip toward the edge o' the cliff, an' over he goes."

"He 'lowed as he got some bumps goin' down the incline, but all he felt was the splash in the water at the bottom. Then he was out o' the game."

"Waal, Daubney," continued the narrator, turning to the mountain-man who had declared a knowledge of the matter, "I reckon you know how the other three made the Injun camp, an' got away with the hosses."

"An' with a slug apiece in Jack Montague an' Little Mallagy, an' a totem scored on the scalp

of Pat Cat," added Daubney, bobbing his head in assent.

"An' how Jack Montague went crack-brained an' jumped his hoss an' all over a cliff," supplemented another, who was also familiar with the story as it was circulated through the mining-country."

"Hoss nothin'!" cried Maddern, with well-affected scorn of such a perversion of the facts.

"He was dreamin'." Pat Cat was on watch, an' seen him. Up he jumps with a yell, an' before Pat could lift a finger he run clean off the bluff, out into a hundred feet o' nothin', straight up an' down!

"When he got to the bottom, he wa'n't fit fur nothin' but sausage-meat."

"Little Mallagy was tough, an' he might have stood the want o' grub an' the loss of his whisky, if he hadn't had the blood dreened out of him to start on."

"When he throwed up his hand, Pat Cat sot down by him to die; but along comes Bob Cady an' gives him another show, which the same it wasn't no good to him."

"But whar's Tommy Rand all this time? You left him in the water."

"When he come round ag'in, he found himself layin' washed up on a sand-bar in the middle o' the river, an' the Injuns nowhar. But he dug out o' that country, an' never went back till the Injuns got another squelcher."

"An' then did he go an' collar all them rocks?"

"What's the reason he shouldn't? He found out that all his pards had passed in their checks. That left him a clear title, didn't it?"

"How about that blind that thar was so much talk about?"

"Waal, ye see, the boys, knowin' that they might have to skedaddle at short notice any time, made a cache o' the gold as they dug it, an' drawed a map fur each, with directions wrote in a cipher what Jack Montague got up, so thar wouldn't be no danger o' their losin' track of it if they had to skip the country fur two or three years, or such a matter. But you bet that Tommy didn't have to use no blind. He jest follered his nose."

"I reckon he swelled around some, after that?"

"He went down to 'Frisco, an' they took him in an' done fur him. He blowed it all in, in less than twelve months."

"Tommy never felt quite right about that dust. He skipped the diggin's on the quiet, without lettin' on that he wasn't as dead as everybody 'lowed he was. I reckon he was afraid some relatives o' the boys would spring up an' claim a share of it. He told me that the boys come up out o' their graves an' called on him once in a while at night."

"That was comfortable. Did you say that he had passed out?"

"Not much! He's alive an' kickin' now, som'ers, fur all I know."

Be it known that all this story of the resuscitation of Tommy Rand, and his recovery of the cached gold-dust, together with his intimacy with Billy Maddern, alias Chinny Charley, was a pure romance, which the sprightly imagination of the narrator spun for a certain purpose, which will appear in due time.

It was listened to by all of the party who were seeking Beth Crawford, they of course as yet quite ignorant of Bob Cady's concern in the cryptogram.

Meanwhile, as a means of easy communication with his confederates, Maddern had announced at the outset that he did not propose to be a dead weight on his entertainers.

"You keep me in powder an' lead, Cap," he had said to Captain Collins, "an' I'll make up to you fur my keep, in the shape of game. Thar's good huntin' all around hyar, an' I don't want no better fur."

Nothing could be more acceptable to the emigrants, and from the start Chinny Charley had proved himself a really valuable addition to their numbers.

Bowie-knife 'Bijah had intimated a desire to accompany him on his hunting excursions; but though, without seeming to do so, he had really made it a point to curry favor with 'Bijah, as with all of Rose's party, he declined to gratify him in this, declaring that he never had any luck unless he played a lone hand.

On the day following his interview with Rose, when the wagon-train was within a single day's journey of the foot-hills, he set out before daylight, promising to find a deer in some of the "pockets" that set in from the plains, and await the train on the site of their next encampment.

He rode not only to the foot-hills but up among the wooded highlands, till he was joined by a man who had been on the lookout for his coming, and had espied him while yet far out on the rolling, treeless prairie.

"Waal, Bolan," was his greeting, though he scanned his confederate to discover Jake Fogg, the constable from the States, under his disguise as a true Westerner, "I reckon the ole man's on hand this time."

"Yes; the lot of 'em's up yonder, keepin' shady till they're sure the coast is clear."

"That's what I like to hyear. It'll feel good to be with the boys once more."

And putting spurs to his horse, Maddern managed to gain upon his guide, so that he dashed in advance among a party of dismounted horsemen.

A glance showed that they were Hank Budlong and his band.

They received their returned comrade with welcoming cheers, and crowded around to shake his hand and hear the news.

He managed to swing from the saddle so as to seize his leader's hand first, muttering with his lips close to his ear, so that he alone distinguished the hurried words:

"Mum's the word! I've got a dynamite bomb in my pocket. Give me a show on the quiet."

CHAPTER XVI.

THE PLOTTERS IN COUNCIL.

HANK BUDLONG flashed a glance of intelligence into the eyes of his subordinate, and went on with his hearty greeting as if nothing secret had passed between them.

"Waal, boys, this hyar is good!" cried Maddern, so close upon the heels of his private communication that there seemed to have been no time for anything of the sort.

"But what's the news, Billy? What have you been up to, any way?"

"Puttin' rocks in yer pockets, boys," laughed Maddern, "an' much thanks I git fur it."

"Thanks! You've been havin' all the fun an' gittin' fat on it."

"Have you been crackin' yer heels together ever sence I've been away?"

"We hain't only held up but one ghastly pilgrim, an' he hadn't nothin' but the rags on his back!"

The speaker groaned dismally at recalling their hard luck.

"Waal, gents," laughed Maddern, "take comfort. You'll be havin' some fun before long now."

"But how long—oh, Lord, how long?"

"In a few days, at the outside."

Then he got away from the crowd, only stopping to say further:

"Boys, which one o' you will go down in some o' the pockets an' git me a deer? I'm out on a hunt, but I'm 'lowin' to do my huntin' by proxy to-day."

"I will! I will! I will!" was the shout on all sides.

"Waal, you kin git as many as you like. All I want is one."

Thereupon the chief was appealed to, and he detailed two of the eager applicants.

He then drew apart with Maddern and Bolan.

"An' now," he said, the moment they were alone, "what news?"

"To begin with, let's drink to good luck," replied Maddern. "Pardner, it's your treat."

The last was addressed to Bolan, and as he turned his attention to his canteen, Maddern darted a warning glance at his chief, and said:

"Rose Crawford is a little beauty!"

Budlong gave a start, and a stare of surprise and inquiry, but Maddern was not now looking at him.

He had turned his glance immediately upon Bolan's face, as the latter looked up from the act of slipping the strap of his canteen over his head, and presented it; and he went on without break in the inflections of his voice:

"If I had my way, I'll be hanged if you should have her!"

This was said with such an air of gay and thoughtless banter, that no one who did not see the glance shot at Budlong would have suspected any hidden meaning in it.

"If she wasn't worth the havin', d'y'e suppose I'd throw away time on her?" asked Bolan, too wary to betray by definite statement anything that Maddern might not yet have learned.

"But it ain't fur her pretty looks nor her winnin' ways that you're after her," persisted Maddern.

"What do you know about what I'm tryin' to git her for?"

"Do you 'low as I've had the free run o' that camp, with the privilege o' settin' everybody's tongue to waggin', an' all fur nothin'? Why, sir, I've spent half my time in tellin' yarns, an' the other half in listenin' to 'em!"

By this time Hank Budlong had had time to get thoroughly on his guard, and to be on the lookout for any revelation; so Maddern turned to him, and said, with a laugh:

"Allow me to interduce ye to Mr. Jake Fogg, o' Missouri."

"Waal, that's neither hyar nor thar!" said Fogg, with a touch of asperity. "The question is how air we to git possession o' the girl?"

"I haven't told you yet all you've got to take into account," suggested Maddern. "How many people air you ready to slaughter to make yer title good?"

"As many as necessary!" replied Fogg, grimly.

"You mean to have her, then, whether or no?"

"You bet yer life, I do!"

"What air ye 'lowin' to do with her brothers?"

Parenthetically Maddern explained to his chief:

"Thar's two o' 'em. They're relatives o' that girl as made such a row at Bloody Run a spell ago. What was her name? Beth, I believe—Beth Crawford."

This was said as if Budlong had no special interest in the person referred to, and only a passing knowledge of her.

"Yes, I hyeared somethin' about it," answered Budlong, dissembling the excitement that the name of Crawford had roused in his breast.

Fogg answered, as to his disposal of the boys: "I thought that was settled when we arranged the Injun biz."

"Scalp 'em?"

"That's what I pay ye fur."

"Always rememberin' as you're to do the job yerself," interposed Budlong.

"Oh, we won't go squeamish on that, all of a sudden!" sneered Fogg.

"We'll stand by our contract," said Budlong.

"Don't furgit that, an' I won't never growl," retorted Fogg, dryly.

Seeing his chance to do so undetected, Maddern grinned derisively at his principal, and went on:

"Thar's another—Bowie-knife 'Bijah they call him."

"Thar won't be much to spill when he's knocked in the head."

"Yet, it seems to me, accordin' to accounts, he got away rather cleverly with the sheriff—"

"Hang the sheriff!"

"No doubt he deserves it; but that ain't in our contract," answered Maddern quickly, with another grin.

"Stick to yer contract, then, an' be hanged to ye!"

"But the contract don't cover all the work you've got laid out fur ye."

"What's the reason it don't?"

"Thar's another that you seem to have lost sight of."

"The girl, her brothers, an' the lout, 'Bijah."

"And Bareback Buck!"

"What's he to do with it?"

"It didn't occur to you that she might pick up a lover or two on the way? Waal, she's got half a dozen of 'em—yer humble sarvant in the bargain!"

"You ain't 'lowin' to make trouble?"

"Me? Oh, no! But you'll hyear from Bareback Buck, loud!"

"All right! I'll take care o' him myself!"

Jack Fogg spoke with grim ferocity, his eyes glaring, his nostrils dilating, his lip lifting with a snarling quiver from his teeth, and his hands working as if they longed to be at the work of strangling or tearing his enemy.

Waal, pursued Maddern, "hyar's a good many people to bury all at once—that's the way it looks to me. Now, do you reckon we kin do that between two camps without raisin' a howl?"

"The camps is purty close together jest about hyar," observed Budlong cautiously, desiring to fall in with his subordinate's plan, whatever it might be, but not yet seeing his way clear.

"Fur Injun work," supplemented Maddern.

"What's to do, then?" asked Fogg, frowning with a suspicion that this was preliminary to backing out.

"I've got a leetle scheme that'll make all lovely, if it's only worked right," said Maddern.

"Let's have it!" cried Fogg, looking much relieved.

"Hyar ye have it, then!"

And from this out, though he avoided exchanging any glance of intelligence with Budlong which would arouse the suspicions of the other, Maddern's manner told his chief that he was stating only one side of the matter.

"They've come out hyar lookin' fur Beth Crawford, an' expectin' to find her, or git track of her, at Coyote. They don't know nothin' about Bob Cady, or any o' that business."

"Now, I've been yarnin' it to 'em about Bob Cady an' an ole side-pard o' his'n that I useter run with—ef I didn't, I'm a liar! An' I've paved the way all slick an' shiny fur to work in my leetle scheme, ef you've the notion to."

"I've played my keerds so purty, that I'm in with 'em thicker'n thieves; an' I'm goin' along with 'em up to Coyote—or leastways as fur up that way as I da'st to go without runnin' the risk o' gittin' my neck stretched."

"When we go through Matchins's Ford, we'll stop fur the night; an' that's as good a place as any fur to hyear about the doin's up to Bloody Run an' Mulligan's Bend."

"Suppose we have a man thar jest down from Mulligan's Bend? Jimmy Kenney's as good a man as I know. He kin lie better'n he kin fight."

"Now, Jimmy he gives 'em all the news; an' of course thar'll be a plenty at Matchins's as has hyeared about it before. An' this hyar's what'll make 'em open their eyes, but none so wide as yer humble sarvent:"

"They'll larn about Bob Cady's havin' the cryptogram, an' that he's passed in his checks fightin' fur it. Then they'll larn—"

"Hold on!" interposed Fogg. "What's all this about Bob Cady an' a cryptogram, as you

call it? What's a cryptogram? You're gittin' me out o' my depth, an' that's a fact."

"Oh!" exclaimed Maddern, a curious expression of satisfaction passing over his face. Don't you know about Bob Cady?"

"I don't know nothin' about no cryptogram!"

"An' you didn't know that Bob Cady was dead, maybe?"

"No, I didn't," admitted Fogg, with manifest chagrin at finding himself at such a disadvantage.

"Waal!" ejaculated Maddern, with a short laugh, "you've gone off half-cocked, an' that's a fact, stranger."

He could not check an involuntary glance of significance at Budlong.

All along thus far he had been feeling his way with the utmost uneasiness, lest he should spring a mine that he believed was planted under his feet.

How was it that this apparently shrewd fellow had come to the men who had been engaged in the struggle for the cryptogram, and sought their assistance in getting possession of the sister of the person who now held the prize?

He had fully made up his mind what course was to be pursued if Fogg betrayed a realization of the situation. He would find that it had come to him too late. There would be no chance for him to retreat. He would simply be held a prisoner, while the outlaws consulted their own interests, making the most of the good luck chance had thrown in their way.

Honor among thieves had "gone West!"

But now he saw that, by some mischance, Fogg had fallen into the snare unaware, and it remained for him to present so much of the facts as would serve his purpose.

This, then, he proceeded to do.

He said that Bob Cady had been killed in a quarrel with his partner over a mining claim, and that, with the assistance of some miners whom she had interested in her behalf, Beth Crawford had avenged her lover, and regained possession of the title to the claim.

While he listened, Fogg cursed the man known to the world as Parson Edwards, by whose direction he had acted. It hurt his professional vanity to be found so at fault.

"If he hadn't been in such a sweat about the girl's gittin' in ahead of us, we could 'a' got all the points, an' knowed what we was about."

Still, ignorant of the value attached to the cryptogram, he did not yet see the real significance of the situation. Nothing was further from his thoughts than that the road-agents whose assistance he had sought could have any possible interest in it. So, his personal humiliation apart, he did not see why the work should not proceed as it had been planned.

Of course Maddern carefully abstained from saying anything that would disturb this complacency.

"So much," he concluded, "is all straight, an' they kin git it from anybody. But now Jimmy Kinney stretches a p'int; an' this hyar's what he gives 'em:

"Beth Crawford, says he, has left Mulligan's Bend, an' gone off after that thar mine—an' that's all we want out o' him. Then I come in; an' this hyar's what I give 'em:

"I'm the boy as knows jest whar that mine is located, an' I know that it was cleaned out long ago by Tommy Rand. Beth Crawford, says I, is goin' after a last-year's bird's nest!"

"Ye see, I've already told 'em all about Tommy Rand, before I was supposed to know anythin' about Bob Cady an' his foolin' over the cryptogram. An' I've told 'em why Tommy left everybody to suppose that he was dead. Oh, I've got a dead open-an'-shut!"

"Now, they won't want to wait till Beth comes back, when I kin show 'em the way to the mine as easy as not, an' save her foolin' away her time in the bargain. So away we sets off in the wilderness. An' it'll be the fault o' you fellers, if you don't receive us handsomely."

"How's that?" demanded Maddern, in conclusion.

Hank Budlong looked reflective.

"We hain't got to jump at it all at once," he said. "We've got all day to think it over. I reckon I'll take a spell to go over it slow, if you're agreeable."

"Oh, take yer time!" cried Maddern, carelessly. "You won't hurt my feelin's if you strike somethin' that suits ye better. Meanwhile, as I hain't got nothin' more to say, I'll go an' see if I can't scare up some grub, an' some whisky, an' a mite of a jack-pot."

He ran away as blithely as if, having acquitted himself of his duty, he proposed to give the matter no further thought.

However, what he did, proved that nothing was further from his purpose.

To several of the boys with whom he seemed to be only joking, he said:

"You happen, one or another of you, to keep an eye on our bantling. If he tries to slip away from the camp, you hold him up—quietly, ye onderstand. If he's at all contrary, you shoot him dead!"

After that, he fooled away his time idly, smoking and gambling and chatting. It was not till after dinner that he found himself,

seemingly by accident, along with Hank Budlong.

"An' now," said Hank, in a tone which showed that he had been waiting for this meeting all the morning, "what is it?"

"I don't believe you're such a fool as to have to be told anythin' more by me," answered Maddern. "How in Cain did it happen that you took this job an' never let me into it? You was playin' the thing fine, wasn't you?"

"Why, man, I never knowed it myself!"

"How could you help but know it?"

"He never give me no names. That was what he told you. Why didn't you put me up to it before? It's you that's been doin' the fine figgerin'."

Maddern laughed.

"Waal, I'm in it alone, then," he said. "I 'lowed you was as big a fool as me. I didn't understand the name. I thought he said Cro-foot."

"But it's her sister, ye say?"

"Of course it is."

"Waal, then?"

"Do you see a better scheme than mine?"

"No, I don't. I only wanted to make sure that I'd got it all straight."

"An' you'll put it through?"

"You bet I will!"

"In spite o' your contract?" laughed Maddern.

"I say o' the contract what he said o' the sheriff—hang it!"

"Then thar's nothin' left but to arrange the details."

This they proceeded with, and soon settled to their satisfaction.

The men sent out to hunt having returned not only with one deer but two, Maddern balanced them behind his saddle, and set out on his return to the wagon-train.

But before he went he told his chief how he had ordered Fogg to be held under surveillance, and Budlong approved of it heartily.

"Ef he gits away with me," he added, with a glare that would have disturbed Jake Fogg's slumbers if he had seen it, "he'll have to git up airy in the mornin'!"

CHAPTER XVII.

INTO THE SNARE.

THE parting with the people of the wagon-train was a tearful one for Rose and the other women.

But they were not alone in the attachment that had sprung up in those weeks of association. Cap. Collins was so much affected that as he wrung Bareback Buck's hand, he swore he would have his heart's blood if he ever brought a tear of sorrow to those bright eyes.

Buck sought rather confusedly to parry this, but the captain growled:

"Don't you try to throw off on me! Do you suppose I haven't had me eye on you? An' if I hadn't been willin' that you should have her, I'd 'a' seen you hanged before you should 'a' had the chances you have."

It was over at last, and they were going northward—to Beth!

This thought dried Rose's eyes, and made them sparkle again with eager anticipation, as she felt that the happy reunion was now almost at hand.

"But won't she be astonished, though, to see us, when she supposes us a thousand miles away!" she cried, looking delightedly into Bareback Buck's eyes.

Then it occurred to her that there was another cause for surprise in her sister, and she dropped her eyes, and blushed divinely.

Matchins's Ford was reached without adventure, but as they rode into that straggling little center of iniquity, Maddern's heart was quickened by a signal of distress from a member of the band who was lounging before one of the saloons.

"Somethin' up!" he muttered to himself.

"Whar's Jimmy Kenney, I wonder?"

Jimmy proved to be in his place, but, without appearing to notice any one with more than the idle curiosity which the appearance of strangers would justify, he repeated the signal.

Rose was conducted to the best room the camp tavern afforded, while the others saw to the care of their horses.

Maddern was very solicitous about his, declaring that he had strained one of his legs in some way; and though nobody had noticed it before, the animal certainly did limp—with very good reason, since his master had artfully inflicted the injury the moment after dismounting.

This detained him while the others repaired to the house; but they would have been surprised had they seen how soon he abandoned the beast after they were out of sight.

A moment later he was in close confab with the fellow who had first signaled him.

"What's the row, Varney?" he demanded.

"Dunno," was the reply. "Big time. Cap'll tell you."

"Cap? I can't leave hyar now. Do you think I kin play the leetle joker on 'em all the while, an' they not drop? A blind mule would pick me up ef I shook him like this."

Maddern spoke with irritation, though he

knew that the trouble must be one that could not be avoided.

"Settle that with Cap," said Varney, as if the matter was none of his. "Easy enough. Ain't a yell away."

"What air you chinnin' about, then? Why don't you lead off?" cried Maddern.

This was a little unreasonable, since Varney had been about as brief as could well be. However, nothing disturbed, he stolidly turned to conduct Maddern to the rendezvous.

Budlong, as he had said, was close at hand, and evidently laboring under unusual excitement.

"What now?" cried Maddern. "Be quick about it. I'm supposed to be rubbin' a cannon-bone, an' that don't take all night, ye know."

"Did you know that Beth Crawford an' Six-foot Si was gittin' ready to cut Mulligan's Bend fur the Lost Mine?" demanded Budlong, in a tone that was an accusation.

"No, I didn't," was Maddern's assurance.

"Then how did you come to git that up about their bein' gone?"

"Wan't it natural to suppose that they would go some time; an' whether they did or not, wouldn't that serve our purpose? But have they gone?"

"You bet they have."

"Waal, that leaves us about whar we was before. If we git the girl, we kin make 'em dance to any tune we've a mind to fiddle."

"We'll freeze to the girl fast enough!"

"How did you find out that they had flitted?"

"I went up to Little 'Frisco, an' hunted up Scotty an' Hunky-dory Larcomb—Six-foot Si don't know them—an' put 'em in Mulligan's Bend to watch him. They tracked him to within twenty mile o' hyar, an' then Hunky-dory sent Scotty to let me into the thing, while he keeps on, an' blazes a trail fur us to follow."

"Waal, what do you want better'n that?"

"It's all right, if I could git a holt o' you an' put you up to it. Only, you don't want to lead off one way while Si's trampin' off the other."

"Is Scotty hyar?"

"Of course."

"Waal, put him in the place o' Jimmy Kenny, an' let him say that he come a piece with Si, an' knows whar to pick up his trail. But how about his nibs, the sheriff?"

"I wasn't such a fool as to let him in."

"Keep it dark while you're around the settlements. When we git out in the mountains, it won't matter what he drops to."

"You bet!" growled Budlong, fiercely.

Meanwhile Bareback Buck and the boys had found a group of loungers engaged in animated conversation about the door of the tavern, Jimmy Kenny being in their midst.

"I reckon we didn't git the right o' the thing down hyar," one of the men was remarking. "But ef you're jest from Mulligan's Bend, maybe you kin give us the news. They do say as the Bend waded in an' cleaned out Coyote entirely."

"Folks will lie," answered Jimmy Kenny, bluntly. "The Bendites did march into Coyote in rather warlike trim, but they come away, ag'in, pickled in corn-juice."

"That's what I hyeared. They backed Coyote down."

"No they didn't. But Coyote wa'n't backin' Joe Moran fur nothin'. Bob Cady's friends run him into Mulligan's Bend, an' stirred 'em up; but they found they was off their base. The boys of Coyote was as ready to string up Joe Moran as anybody; but he skun out, an' run to cover Bloody Run."

"How about that, pardner? That's the cream o' the hull business. They do say a woman took a hand—an' a mighty purty one she was too—an' got away with the hull outfit."

"Now ye're shoutin'. You want to see Beth Crawford, an' then die!"

"She was Cady's best girl, they say."

"I wish't she was mine! But, pardner, thar'll be peace in the house what she runs, an' she won't have to fight all the while to presarve it, nuther!"

The crowd burst into laughter at this notion of peace, but they were called to book with unexpected sharpness.

"Hold on here!" cried a clear, ringing, boyish voice.

And Cass Crawford strode up to them with flashing eyes and crimson cheeks.

"I'll trouble you sir," he went on, addressing Denny, "to adopt a more respectful tone in what you have to say—"

"Eh! what's the matter with you, chicken?" asked Kenny, looking at him out of the corner of his eye.

"That is my sister you are speaking about, and I don't like your flippant way of alluding to her. No gentleman makes a jest of a lady when there is nobody by to call him to account; and gentlemen," he cried, still more fiercely, flaring a challenging glare around upon the crowd, "don't listen to such things complacently!"

"Hold on! hold on!" expostulated Kenny, looking surprised, but not disposed to resent this bantam crow. "What did I say? That the lady's as nerry as she is harnsome. I reckon thar ain't nothin' disrespectful about that."

You could say that o' my sister, ef she was half as good-lookin' as Miss Crawford, or had half her gall."

The crowd seemed to enter into the spirit of Kenny's queer apology, and with all due gravity several of them assured Cass that they had not perceived anything offensive in the "gent's" remarks.

They succeeded in convincing the boy that perhaps he had been "a little too previous."

Without making a display, Bowie-knife 'Bijah had quietly advanced to Cass's side, evidently intending to back him against all comers, right or wrong.

Mart had turned quite pale, and glanced at Bareback Buck. It was plain that his nerves were somewhat shaken, but he stood his ground, nevertheless; and they say that the soldier who wants to run, but don't, is the best in the end. Certainly Mart had already proved that he could fight at a pinch.

Bareback Buck was amused more than anything else. He liked to see the bantling ruffle his feathers.

"All I want," said Cass, in a somewhat apologetic tone, "is what's right."

"Or know the reason why," supplemented Kenny. "That's what I stand fur myself, an' that's what I like to see in any man. I reckon you're from Mulligan's Bend later'n I be, an' kin give these gents more points than I kin, if you're a mind to."

"No. I have just come from across the plains, and I should be indebted to you if you can tell me the whereabouts of my sister. She is now at Mulligan's Bend, do you say?"

"Acrost the plains!" exclaimed Kenny, with well-simulated surprise. "From the States?"

"Yes."

"Then you air jest in, an' ain't up to the doin's out hyar lately?"

"No; I know nothing about it."

"Not how Bob Cady was called in?"

"I beg your pardon," said Cass, not understanding Jimmy Kenny's figurative expression. But it was plain to Bareback Buck, and he quickly interposed.

"Suppose we take this matter a little quietly, if you are not particularly engaged," he said.

"Me? Oh, no. Yours to command," responded Kenny.

"Gentlemen, will you join us?" was Buck's invitation to the crowd.

They were never known to refuse, and now accepted the invitation as one man.

Cass and Mart did not drink, nor did Bowie-knife 'Bijah, though he took a cigar when Buck drew Kenny from the crowd to a more private interview.

Cass was shocked and grieved to learn of the death of Bob Cady, and he as well as Mart listened with bated breath to the account of the peril to which their sister had been exposed.

While the narrative was in progress Maddern made his appearance, and frowned at seeing Kenny already engaged.

He made a sign of warning to his confederate, and then sauntered up to the table about which the others were seated.

Kenny understood that he was to take his cue from Maddern, and so proceeded with his story warily.

When he came to the cryptogram, Maddern broke in with:

"You don't mean to tell me that Bob Cady has been muddin' his topknot over Pat Cat's blind all these years?"

"I reckon thar's a heap as would like to have had his chance at it," answered Kenny.

"But, man, it's no good!" protested Maddern.

"No good?" repeated Kenny, with an incredulous smile. "Waal, I'd like to go to my pile on it. They've drawered some blood over that thar dockiment, an' I shouldn't wonder ef they drawered a mite more before they're done with it. Hyar's Six-foot Si, he's took a hand, an' he swars he'll see the thing through, an' the lady have her rights; an' thar's Hank Budlong an' his gang prowlin' about som'ers, an' he swars as the cryptogram belongs to him, an', whether or no, thar ain't no livin' man goin' to take out that gold from under his nose."

"Gold! Thar ain't no gold thar. That's been scooped in, long ago."

Kenny closed one eye, and smiled.

"But I tell ye," persisted Maddern, waxing warm, "that I myself went with Tommy Rand when he collared the *cache* what the Big Four left behind 'em when the Injuns run 'em off."

"Look a-hyar, boys," turning to Bareback Buck and the others, "what did I tell ye out yon on the perarie? Waal, I swar! I never struck me, an' I'll bet it never struck Tommy Rand, that Pat Cat might give that thar cipher away. An' hyar's Bob Cady foolin' over it, an' a lot more blame fools knockin' one another in the head fur it!"

He then repeated to Jimmy Kenny the essentials of the story he had told about the camp-fire.

"Waal," he concluded, "if Six-foot Si, or anybody else wants to prove whether I know what I'm talkin' about when I say they're wranglin' over a last-year's bird's-nest, they kin keep their cryptogram to themselves, an' I'll agree to lead 'em to the *cache* as easy as you'd show a stranger the way to the bar."

"Miss Crawford needn't to waste no more time over that matter. We're goin' to Mulligan's Bend, if that's whar she is, as straight as we kin git thar; an' I'll bet any livin' man, in Mulligan's Bend or out of it, a thousand dollars to a cent that he don't find enough gold-dust in that *cache* to pay fur three fingers of old rye! An' ef I hain't got the sweet thousand myself, I'll git a backer what'll put it up fur me."

He said this with a swagger which would have deceived any one into believing it sincere. At the same time he gave Kenny a signal intimating that he was to go no further in his revelations.

"Waal," he said, "that may all be so. If it is, it's a pity we didn't know it a long time ago."

While this interview was in progress a man had ridden up to the tavern and entered the bar.

There the theme was still under discussion, and he joined in with the freedom from ceremony universal in the West.

"I'd orter know somethin' about this hyar, gents," he observed, taking up the discussion as to the future issue of the struggle. "I ain't twelve hours out o' the company o' the man as has sworn to put the thing through; an' such of ye as know Six-foot Si know he's a bad one to buck ag'in'. You hyear me? Hank Budlong has got his chance when he takes a notion to go for that gold-mine. But he'll have to speak soon, ef he 'lows to be in this hand."

"Twelve hours?" repeated one of the loungers. "Is Six-foot Si anywhar around these hyar diggin's?"

"I come down with him from Mulligan's Bend, an' left him up at the Two Forks. That ain't twenty mile from hyar, is it? He's goin' fur that gold-mine hand over fist; but you bet he's got a leetle army along with him, an' he ain't afeard o' no fightin'-men Hank Budlong kin scare up."

"I reckon thar's some gents over yon as would like to hyear this hyar," volunteered the lonnger, indicating the table where Maddern and Jimmy Kenny were playing their parts.

Scotty looked over at them with a keen scrutiny, as if curious to know what manner of men were interested in Six-foot Si's movements just then.

He had spoken so loud as to attract their attention, and they were looking at him.

"I reckon thar ain't no reason why they shouldn't know all they like about Six-foot Si," he said. "Si he don't never go behind the door when he's called fur."

This was delivered aggressively, as if Scotty were speaking in behalf of a friend.

"Did I understand you to say that you had just been with Six-foot Si?" asked Buck.

"That's what I said, stranger."

"An' that he was on his way to seek a gold mine in which Bob Cady was interested before his death?"

"He ain't goin' fur nothin' else, an' it'll take an earthquake to stop him."

"May I ask, was he accompanied by a lady?"

"Beth Crawford. She's every inch a lady, stranger—not only that, she holds over ary lady you ever see. She could lead that expedition as well as Six-foot Si, ef she only sot her mind to it."

"And she is within a few miles of here?" broke in Cass, breathlessly.

Scotty stared at him, as if questioning why he had "broke loose."

"She is my sister," he explained. "Could you direct us how to join her as soon as possible?"

"That's easy enough, if you kin foller a plain trail."

"I beg your pardon," fairly panted Cass, "but if you could show us the way, we would make it an object for you."

"Oh, waal, I did have a mite o' business o' my own, further to the s'uth'ard, but ef you're talkin' business—"

"I am talking business, if you will say what will satisfy you."

"Oh, I'm easy satisfied. We won't quarrel about that. So you're her brother, be ye? Waal, you'd orter be cl'ar grit clean through, ef you belong to her any way."

The arrangement was soon concluded, Scotty agreeing to give a day to setting them on the trail, which they could then follow as well without his assistance as with it.

Maddern declared that he would see the thing through, the more so since he thought he saw a chance for "lots o' fun, an' maybe a speck in the bargain."

"Tommy Rand give me a pointer that he'd 'a' worked out himself, only he had his pile; an' if Six-foot Si has got the men an' grub together, he may be willin' to take in a leetle prospectin' further up the mountain, after he finds that the *cache* is no good."

When he learned where Scotty had left the trail, he declared that they could save a day by permitting him to guide them directly to the *cache*; but Buck decided that they would follow the trail, and try to overtake the mining-party.

When Rose was told that she would be in her sister's arms in three or four days, she could not contain her joy, but it bubbled over in gayety

which the others could not help but participate in.

So they went into the snare Hank Budlong had prepared for them.

It was on the third day, while Rose was chatting gayly, in enthusiastic admiration of the wild gulches and towering crags, that they were startled by a voice directly in front of them crying:

"Now!"

Two puffs of white smoke on either side of the trail follow the report of fire-arms.

Bareback Buck gave a spasmodic start. Rose's horse reared, wheeled half round, and settled to the ground, rolling over on his back, and flinging his heels wildly into the air.

At the same instant several men leaped from the bushes, and leveled their weapons for a general fusillade.

"Back! back! We are attacked!" shouted Buck, leaping to the ground so quickly that he asked it almost in time to catch Rose as she fell.

Luckily she was thrown clear of her horse, and Buck seized her and dragged her away before the animal rolled over upon her.

CHAPTER XVIII.

AMBUSHED.

HAVE we described the magnificent black stallion on which Buck rode without saddle or bridle?

Horse and man had lived in such close and affectionate intimacy, that many of the instincts of the beast were more like those of a dog than of his own kind.

No sooner did he realize that an attack had been made on his master than, instead of wheeling round and flying in wild panic as most horses would have done, Pard—for thus was he affectionately named—charged the waylayers with a scream of rage, seizing one by the shoulder, snatching him off his feet, and dashing him to the ground, there to trample the life out of him with lightning blows of his flying forefeet.

"Kill the mad devil!" shouted one of the men, as they scattered before this furious assault.

They fired, but wildly, and a yell of terror, ending in a scream of pain, told that he had "got in his work" on a second.

But he was not having the fight all to himself, though he had already done good service in creating a momentary diversion of the enemy.

After an involuntary pause of dismay at the suddenness of the onslaught, Cass recovered himself just as 'Bijah dashed by him to the assistance of Rose, leaping to the ground without stopping to pull up his horse.

Cass drew both revolvers, and digging his heels into the flanks of his frightened horse to force him forward, opened fire with the dauntlessness if not the coolness of a veteran.

Never before had he been under fire or shot at a man; but now he had no thought of self, nor did he shrink from the infliction of death, as he had always supposed he would.

He had but one thought. His pet sister, twin-born with himself, was in peril of her life, if she was not already slain.

He was consumed by rage and a savage determination to annihilate her assailants.

Mart drew his weapons mechanically, but was too much dismayed and confused to use them. He could only sit and stare, white-lipped and panting.

As he lifted Rose, terror-stricken yet conscious, in his arms, Bareback Buck shouted:

"Pard! Pard! Come hyar, sir!"

The horse gave one final kick with his hindfeet, sending a man sprawling, and bounded to the side of his master.

Blood was streaming from several wounds in his body; he was wild with excitement, yet as obedient to the will of his master as a well-trained subordinate.

Seeing Rose thus cared for, and knowing that the best service he could do was to hold the assault in check till Buck's object could be accomplished, 'Bijah had poured shot after shot into the enemy till both revolvers were empty, shouting:

"It is Jake Fogg! Drop him, Cass! Do ye see him?"

And he hurled one of his empty revolvers at a man who was staggering from the effects of a shot already received.

One of the outlaws—no less a person than Hank Budlong himself—shouted with laughter at this, for he it was who had sent a bullet into Jake Fogg's back, with his compliments!

At this instant 'Bijah heard a scream of agonized terror from Rose, just behind him, and turned as if electrified.

He saw Bareback Buck with Rose partly on Pard's back, staggering backward so as to drag her off again, his head enveloped in a cloud of white smoke that could have come from nowhere but from the revolver held in Chinny Charley's outstretched hand, he having ridden forward so as to reach across Pard to fire at his master.

"The traitor!" yelled 'Bijah. "He has led us into this ambush! Die, you dog!"

And snatching one of his terrible bowies from his belt, he hurled it with unerring aim and the speed of an arrow at the villain.

As Maddern fired again at Buck, his hand flew upward, he uttered a gurgling cry, quickly cut short, and staring in open-mouthed horror at 'Bijah, he fell off his horse backward, transfixed through the throat with the fatal missile!

'Bijah sprang forward, throwing his arms about Buck, and so supporting him helped him to restore Rose to Pard's back.

"Thank God for that throw, pard!" ejaculated Buck, turning his head so as to look into 'Bijah's face. "I'll never forget ye for it!"

His face was smudged with powder, the shot having been so near, and he was nearly blinded, but he was himself yet.

"Get back with her out of harm's way," he kept on without break. "I'll take care o' these. Take the boys too."

His articulation was sluggish and his glance heavy and uncertain, but he stuck to his purpose grimly.

"Go, Pard!" he commanded, slapping the horse on the rump.

"Buck! oh, Buck!" cried Rose, extending her arms toward him, gazing in horror at his powder-blackened visage.

"My darling!" he ejaculated, waving her away.

Then he turned to meet the enemy, with a look that struck terror to those nearest him.

Drawing both revolvers, he poured a continuous fire before him.

But his head swam; he swayed and tottered; his heavy eyelids drooped; and with a sudden lurch he fell forward upon his face, throwing out his arms, and dragging Hank Budlong to the ground with him.

Meanwhile, 'Bijah had seized Cass's bridle-rein, and turned his horse back, shouting:

"Go! look after Miss Rosy! Don't stop fur nothin'. Git clean out o' this."

Though loth to leave his friends in such a strait, Cass yielded to their direction. After all, they were fighting to secure Rose's safety, and to aid her flight was as necessary as to hold her enemies in check.

Mart followed his brother.

Bowie-knife 'Bijah turned, to leap to Buck's side just as he went down.

He realized that Chinny Charlie's treacherous shot, against which Buck had been struggling all this time, had conquered his iron will at last.

The thought flashed through 'Bijah's mind that, in his helplessness, Buck would be killed by the antagonist he had dragged to the ground with him.

'Bijah still held an empty revolver in his left hand, and seizing its barrel in his right, he struck Hank Budlong a stunning blow on the head with its butt.

Then with a yell as if he were now free to begin the battle in earnest, he sprang over the bodies of the fallen men, and faced the four outlaws who were yet in fighting trim.

Snatching out his bowie-knives, he hurled them with terrific force and lightning rapidity.

How his form now towered! That uplifted carriage of the head; those piercing eyes; those hard-locked lips—there was no weakness or imbecility in them now.

At the first cast he drove a bowie to the hilt in the breast of a man who was in the act of firing at him.

The second tried to duck the winged missile, but he lost a part of his scalp and the most of one ear, and was so horrified by the result that he turned and ran, yelling frantically.

'Bijah leaped toward the third, knocked up the weapon that was just exploding in his hand, so as to ward off what might have been a fatal shot, and escape with his shirt-sleeve blown into shreds and his arm scorched and blackened with powder, while he plunged his bowie into his adversary's side with such force as to hurl him headlong into a thicket.

The fourth, demoralized at the panic-stricken flight of the second, and the swift-falling fate of his even less fortunate comrades, turned and ran in blind terror, even dropping his revolver as a bowie struck him in the shoulder, for the moment fairly paralyzing his arm.

Left in possession of the field, 'Bijah turned to see how it fared with "Miss Rosy."

At what he saw he threw up his hands, and then let them fall despondently at his sides.

Through a break in the foliage, he could see some distance back over the trail, to where Rose and her brothers had just plunged into the midst of a body of horsemen.

The aggressive way in which Cass threw up his arm, only to be seized by the wrist by one of the men, showed that they were hostile—probably a part of Fogg's men; for of course 'Bijah knew nothing about Hank Budlong and his band.

For a moment 'Bijah was hopeless; but then it occurred to him that neither Rose or her brothers had any personal injury to fear from Jake Fogg, since Jim Rountree's interests could not be subserved in that way.

"But it's Buck, hyar," he reflected, "as they'd move heaven an' earth to wipe out, knowin' what he is to Rosy. If they've fetched him,

she's got to stand it; but if thar's any life in him yet, it's fur me to save it fur her."

Blood was streaming from several wounds, which would soon try all his fortitude, though now he was too much excited to realize his injuries.

Only his left arm was nearly helpless from the ranging of the bullet and the force of the powder along it, as he parried the shot of his last victim.

To see the predicament his friends were in; to realize that the real peril was to himself and Bareback Buck; to resolve to save the man "Rosy" loved, even at the risk of his own safety; to leap to his side and see if he was yet living to save, were the work of a moment.

He had first to drag Hank Budlong's body off of Buck. Then he lifted Buck's head in his arms, crying:

"Buck! Buck! fur God's sake wake up."

Buck's eyes half-unclosed, as his head rolled lifelessly on 'Bijah's arm, but he made no sound.

"He's alive! Thank God fur that much!" cried 'Bijah, delighted.

Then a bright idea came to him.

"Wake up, ole man!" he shouted in his ear. "Don't ye hear me? It's Miss Rosy's a-want-in' ye—Miss Rosy!"

"Hugh! Is tha' you, par?" mumbled Buck, drowsily. And their enemies were coming!

'Bijah snatched off Hank Budlong's canteen, drew the stopper, and put it to Buck's lips, tipping it carefully so as not to strangle him.

When he had thus forced a swallow or two down his throat, he poured some in his palm, and bathed Buck's face.

Then it occurred to him that he could secure the stimulus of a keen smart, and benefit rather than injure the sufferer otherwise as well; and he poured some of the fiery liquor upon Buck's wounds.

Buck writhed and groaned, and started up with a decidedly irritable protest.

'Bijah shouted the inspiring name of Rose.

"Eh! What's that, pard? Rose? Whar's Rose?"

"Hyar! Crawl on to my back, ole man. Don't ye see? We've got to git out o' this hyar."

Buck brushed his hand across his eyes, and the liquor he had drank now beginning to quicken his pulses, while his wounds stung like fire externally, he woke to a realization of the situation, and the instinct of self-preservation again took possession of him.

To make his mounting as easy as possible, 'Bijah lay flat on his breast, so that Buck had only to roll over upon him, and put his arms about his neck.

"We're goin' to Rosy," he said. "Keep yer nerve stiddy, an' hang on."

Then he rose to his knees, and clasping Buck's legs at his side, staggered to his feet, and made away from the spot as fast as his weakness and such a burden would permit.

One thing, even in the exigency of this perilous moment, he had not overlooked. As easier than the recovery of the knives he had thrown in battle, he snatched the bowies of the fallen men he passed in returning to where Bareback Buck lay, so that he was again thoroughly armed with his favorite weapons.

Buck's revolvers he had thrust into their holsters, and replaced the one he had thrown at Jack Fogg by another of the same caliber snatched up at random.

Then followed a struggle against fainting nature which only the noblest emotions make men equal to. No one would have dreamed that it would be possible for him, so burdened, to traverse the rugged way he staggered along.

He was not foolish enough to suppose that he could outrun pursuit in this fashion. But the ground was rocky, so that his trail would be difficult, if not impossible to follow; and while their enemies were beating the coverts for them, Bareback Buck would have some chance to recover his scattered wits.

Meanwhile, if he could find a place that was defensible, he might eke out their time still a little further by standing a siege.

Fortune favored him. If he had known the way, he could not have gone more directly to a spot where two huge boulders lay at the base of a cliff, leaving just space enough so that he could pass between them to the shelter within their embrace.

Once within, his enemies could only approach him one at a time, and he laughed fiercely as he thought how he would take care of them if they tried that on.

They were scarcely ensconced when the enemy appeared before their stronghold.

CHAPTER XIX.

A DUEL TO THE DEATH.

BACK to the scene of the ambuscade were led Rose, in despair over the fate of her lover, Cass with his head hanging on his breast with humiliation at having run headlong into recapture, and Mart terror-stricken by the ferocious violence of the assault.

They found men writhing in anguish and howling forth the most blood-curdling execrations, and others silent and motionless in death.

Hank Budlong lay stunned by 'Bijah's blow. Jake Fogg had risen to a sitting posture, pale and grim with compressed lips and glittering eyes. He knew that he was wounded in the back, perhaps mortally, and by whose hand.

Neither Bareback Buck nor Bowie-knife 'Bijah were on the spot, and Rose's heart began to beat once more.

"Oh, if he can have escaped!" she aspirated, in the selfishness of love thinking only of her dearest.

Hank Budlong was restored to consciousness, only to vent his first rage in a torrent of execrations poured on the head of his subordinate who held his party too far in the rear to be at hand on the springing of the ambushade.

From this futile indulgence he was diverted by the announcement that the fugitive victors had been run to earth.

"Rout 'em out!" he shouted. "What do you come hyar fur to tell me you have found 'em? Fetch 'em hyar fur me to cut their hearts out!"

The men retreated from his presence, followed by a volley of oaths.

Jake Fogg now interposed.

"This hyar is what I've bargained fur," he said, pointing to Rose. "You kin fool away time on them others if you like. This hyar's all I want."

"What!" roared Budlong, whirling round upon him. "Ain't you dead yit?"

"Not much, Mister Man!" declared Fogg, returning Budlong's glare of hate with a scowl of accusation.

"Waal, it's time you was! I 'lowed I was well shet of ye."

"Thar's whar you fooled yerself."

"I say, I'd druther have yer carcass than yer company, I would!"

"It ain't too late to try your hand at it ag'in, if you're man enough to stand at my face, instid of at my back."

"What do you mean, you lyin' hound?"

Fogg smiled grimly.

"Let's have business before pleasure," he suggested. "Time enough to settle our personal account after we square up the business that brought us hyar. Do you turn the girl over to me?"

"I'll see you hanged first!"

"Didn't you git her fur me?"

"Blast you, no!"

"Then what did you git her fur?"

"Fur myself!"

"But you engaged—"

"Pish fur yer engagements! We don't keep no engagements out hyar only fur gamblin' debts an' a leetle game called pistols-fur-two-an'-coffee-fur-one. Do you know it?"

"You don't mean to give her to me?"

"Not when I kin do better."

"What use kin you put her to?"

"None o' your infernal business!"

"Waal," said Fogg, his voice hoarse with concentrated rage, "you air the blackest-hearted thief an' the most sneakin', cowardly cur it was ever my bad fortune to run across! Order your varlets hyar to kill me fur ye—"

"I kin do that fur myself, my game-cock! I'll cut your comb fur you in any shape you like, an' on short notice."

Fogg deliberately stepped to a thicket, and cut a switch not more than a yard long and about the size of his little finger.

"This is good enough for a crawlin' whelp like you!" he declared, unbuckling his belt and tossing it with the weapons it held aside.

Stung to the quick by this superb contempt, the outlaw stood staring, at a loss how to meet it.

"Come!" cried Fogg. "I whipped your best man, an' now I propose to switch you!"

"Ef you've got it in ye," growled Budlong, bursting with rage, "hyar's yer chance! I don't want so much as a switch ag'in' you!"

And throwing aside his weapons as the other had done, he advanced upon him with his hands working spasmodically as if in anticipation of a deadly clutch on his throat.

Fogg drew the lithe switch through his fingers, and then holding it in readiness to administer the ignominious cut, began to move warily about with a cat-like tread, watching his chance to get in on his adversary.

Budlong crept after him like an alert panther.

Over this so novel duel Hank Budlong's men were wrought to the highest pitch of delighted excitement. They needed not to be told that it was intended to be to the death. The only question was, would the sheriff succeed in laying the whip over Hank's back before he got to the more deadly, though not so much to be dreaded work of seeking his life?

Leaping from their horses, they gathered about the contestants in a circle that now pressed upon and now receded before the duelists, as they moved about the little glade.

From where she sat Rose stared upon this combat, fascinated by the horror of it. By as much more savage as it was for men to slay each other with their bare hands rather than with deadly weapons, by so much more ferocious did these men look.

Cass and Mart yielded to the natural mascu-

line interest in a personal struggle—the more deadly, the more absorbing—to the forgetfulness of everything else.

With a lightning spring, Fogg made a pass at his adversary; but with an equally agile leap in retreat, Hank escaped, and the whip whistled harmlessly through the air.

The spectators uttered a simultaneous yell of excitement, and as abruptly relapsed into silence.

Budlong sought to close in while the whip was down; but Fogg eluded him.

"Curse you, you done that cleverly!" commented Budlong.

"I'll improve on it the next time!" declared Fogg grimly.

"I'm waitin' on ye, cully!"

"I won't keep you long."

"Take yer own time."

"I mean to."

"Look out fur me."

And Budlong himself made the attack, plunging forward to invite the whip, but as quickly recoiling, intending to spring in over it when it had descended.

Fogg only smiled.

"That's a chestnut," he said contemptuously.

"Give us somethin' modern."

"I'll try to accommodate you presently," answered Budlong, covering his chagrin with an air of carelessness.

Then they resumed their former tactics, moving warily about each other, waiting for an opening.

It came.

With a catlike bound Fogg cleared the intervening space.

Budlong threw up his hand to catch the descending wrist.

It eluded his grasp.

Like a flash of lightning the whip made an outward detour, then cut under his arm and made the dust fly from his broad back as it coiled about his body.

The next instant the men came together with a terrific collision.

Then they whirled round and round till they fell under the feet of the surging circle of frantic spectators, there to writhe and roll, Budlong howling like a madman, Fogg as silent and grim as death.

The outlaws, each intent upon getting and maintaining his own position as near the combatants as possible, while he prevented his fellows from pressing upon them, shouted encouragement or direction, or merely yelled in sympathetic excitement.

"Go fur 'im, Hank!"

"Hang to 'im, ole man!"

"Twist the snoozer's head back!"

"Now you've got 'im! Use 'im up! Shake the liver an' lights out of 'im!"

"Stand back thar, will ye? You're trampin' on 'em!"

"Ya-a-a-ah!"

It was a human dog-fight.

Rose could not endure to look upon anything so ferocious. She hid her face in her hands, shuddering.

She forgot that these men were her ruthless enemies, wrangling to see which should have the privilege of bartering away her happiness for his own selfish advantage. She remembered only the suffering they were inflicting upon each other.

Cass and Mart seized upon every opportunity that momentary breaks in the circle offered to get a glimpse of the writhing figures on the ground.

Now they saw the face of Hank Budlong convulsed with agony; and now it was the grim visage of Jake Fogg, black with strangulation, the eyes protruding horribly, the bull-dog jaws locked upon and grinding to shapeless pulp the thumb they had seized upon between their iron molars.

His left hand thus disabled, Hank had a death-grip on his enemy's throat with his remorseless right. If he could withstand the excruciating torture that made him roar like a wild beast, he would kill him in the end.

As this horrible conviction shot through Cass's mind, his attention was attracted to Rose by a shuddering cry of fear proceeding from her bloodless lips.

Then he recalled the nameless peril that menaced her. With Jake Fogg dead, she would be at the mercy of the ferocious brute who had first entered into his nefarious scheme, then broken faith with him, and finally put him out of his way by murder.

To what end had Budlong resolved to keep possession of Rose?

But it was all too horrible to speculate upon. Anything connected with such a demon must be worse than death. The one hope was to secure her release at all hazards.

He saw that the outlaws were so deeply absorbed in the fight as to have quite forgotten their prisoners.

Now was the chance, if ever!

"Rose!" he cried, with his lips to her ear, seizing her wrist and directing her hand to Pard's mane, "look out! I'm going to strike the horse! Now's your time to get away!"

"Go, Pard, go!"

And he slapped the horse smartly with his open hand.

Whether it was that the girl was too much confused to comprehend what was required of her, or that the effect on the spirited animal was more marked than it was natural to expect; certainly, as Pard swerved and bounded away, Rose lost her balance and slipped off his back opposite the side on which she was sitting.

Though she clutched at his mane, and so brought her feet under her, saving herself from an ugly fall backward, yet she was unhorsed, and he sped away leaving her on the ground.

The thud of flying hoofs and an involuntary cry of alarm from Rose and Mart in unison, drew the eyes of some of the outlaws from their amusement to their duty, cutting off all hope of escape.

At that moment Hank Budlong sunk forward upon the body of his adversary in a faint.

But Jake Fogg did not cast him off and rise a conqueror. He too lay still.

"Leave 'em alone! Stand back, thar! Keep yer dirty hands off!" yelled a furious voice.

"The ole man has got him yet; an' as long as he kin hang on, thar ain't no call fur to make or meddle."

"The snoozer's dead!"

"He won't be no deader, then, ef you leave him rest fur a spell."

Cass could not endure such cold-blooded ruthlessness as this.

"Take him off!" he cried—"oh, take him off!"

He got a brutal laugh for his tender humanity.

"We'll give you the carcass in a minute, ef he's worth anythin' to you," grinned Shorty who had prevented the others from interfering, not to save Fogg, but to ascertain if he was really done for.

Cass turned away. What would be the fate of his sister among such demons as these? He went to her and put his arms about her; and clasping him around the neck, she fell to sobbing hysterically.

Not till Fogg had been examined and pronounced past the chance of recovery did Shorty permit Hank Budlong's grip to be loosened from his throat, that the unconscious murderer might himself be revived.

When he awoke to a knowledge of his triumph, the road-agent chief's exultation was horrible to witness.

He went and stood over the body, gloating upon its distorted features. Then, as a twinge shot from his swollen and mangled thumb to the very core of his heart, he vented his pain and rage in a malicious kick.

He was in too much pain to take any active part in the siege of the stronghold where Bareback Buck and Bowie-knife 'Bijah lay entrenched, and soon grew impatient over its non-success.

"Let the beggars stay!" he growled. "What's the use of our throwin' away time on 'em? We've got what we want. But ef we hang around hyar much longer, we'll be too late to turn it to account. Boys, it's the Lost Mine we're after; but Billy Maddern's gone whar he won't do no more kickin' about it. They've knocked some of our good men out; but, by the same token, thar won't be so many to divvy up amongst when we ketch on to the dust. That's one consolation."

And if any felt deeper regret at the loss of their comrades, they took no particular pains to make their feelings manifest.

Hank ordered his men to take the trail again, and no one suggested a delay for the purpose of burial.

The wounded, however, were given such relief as could readily be afforded; but one poor fellow, who could not go on, was left with food and water and a temporary dressing of his hurts, to await in pain and solitude their return.

Then the captives were led away; but at night, when they had gone into camp and supper was being partaken of, Hank Budlong scowled blackly upon Cass and Mart, and belittled at them:

"What in Cain be we lettin' these worthless varmints spile good grub fur, when we hain't got enough of it fur ourselves? Hyar, kick the leetle scalawags out o' camp. They ain't no manner o' good to us. The girl'll fetch as much by herself as the hull raft of 'em. We don't feed nothin' what don't bring us nothin' in, ye understand. Rout 'em out! Git, you skeezicks!"

And the boys were fairly driven away, with kicks and cuffs and curses.

Without arms, without food, afoot in that trackless, night-shrouded wilderness, their strait was hopeless indeed.

Thus far Mart had borne up bravely, but now, torn from his sister, he cast himself upon the ground and burst into tears, groaning:

"Oh, Cass! what is to become of us all?"

CHAPTER XX.

A BAFFLED DIPLOMAT.

AFTER having lain awake the better part of the night, a prey to the most poignant grief and suspense, Rose Crawford fell into a fitful

slumber toward morning, only to live over again in the most harrowing nightmare the terrible events she had passed through and her no less fearful apprehensions for the future.

From this she was startled by the fall of a heavy hand on her shoulder, and she leaped up with a cry of fear, to find Hank Budlong bending over her.

"Had a good sleep; hain't ye?" was his greeting. "Waal, that's what'll bring the roses back to yer cheeks."

She shivered at the thought that his red right hand had come in contact with her person, and shrunk quailing from the admiring smile that accompanied his essay at a compliment.

"Are we to start now?" she asked, anxious for anything that would relieve her of his proximity.

"We ain't in no sweat about it," he answered, his smile fading into a look of sullen displeasure at her obvious desire to be rid of him.

"I will do whatever you say," she murmured tremulously, anxious to placate him by submissiveness.

"You bet you will!" was his blunt affirmation. "An', to begin with, what kind o' traps have you got in them saddle-bags o' yours? Any writin' fixin's—paper an' pencils, an' sich?"

"No," she answered. "I could carry so few things with me, I thought I could get such things out here, if I needed them."

He scratched his head reflectively.

"Waal, that shuts us off thar," he remarked.

"We'll have to try somethin' else. Look a hyar. I'll tell what I want, an' maybe you kin put me up to a way o' doin' it."

"Did you hear what Jimmy Kenny an' Scotty said, back thar at Matchins's Ford, about your sister?"

"I was told that she was somewhere out here in the mountains looking for a mine."

"Waal, so much of it wa'n't lyin', though they done some tall stretchin' in spots. Now, what I'm 'lowin' to do, is to trade you off—"

Rose started and turned deathly pale at this announcement.

"Oh, ye needn't jump," laughed Budlong. "It's with your sister as I'm 'lowin' to make the trade, though I reckon you'd fetch a party round figger in any market."

"Trade me for my sister?" cried Rose, in unabated dismay.

"Trade you fur a gold mine, my dear. Your sister's a stunner, too; an' ef I'd take all this trouble fur ary woman-critter, it might be for one o' you. But what I'm after jest at present, is rocks—solid rocks! Your sister's got 'em, or the bill what calls fur 'em; an' I'm 'lowin' to trade you off to her fur the cryptogram, as they call it."

"Give me to my sister? Oh, if you only would!"

"That's what I'm 'lowin' to do. But ef I take you to market, they may gobble you up, an' leave me nowhar! I was 'lowin' to have you write a note to her, tellin' her as I had you bad, an' you wanted her to trade even, an' be quick about it. Tell her you're skeered to death. Lay it on as thick as you please. Say you're afeard I'll cut your weasand fur ye ef she don't come to time. Make me a holy terror while ye're about it. I kin stand it."

"Oh, that will be unnecessary, if only she knows that I am in your power. She will give anything you ask, and at once, too."

"Waal, now, that's nice to have a sister what thinks sich a heap of ye, ain't it? Some folks would higgle, and try to come the skin game on a feller—"

"I will tell you what to do," interposed Rose, not greatly interested in Mr. Budlong's reflections. "I have a little Bible with my name written on the fly-leaf. If you take that to her, she will know that it is from me. And I will tell you what to say to her, so that she will know how I came to be here. She hasn't the least idea of such a thing, you know. She supposes that I am still at home, a thousand miles off."

"Waal, now, what a head-piece you've got, to be sure. You cock an' prime me, an' when I get off I'll strike plum center, an' then we'll be happy all round."

"Tell her that Judge Rountree was trying to force me into a marriage with a brother of his, so as to get some money that has fallen to me, and that Bijah Losey helped my brothers—Cass and Mart—and me to run away, and go to her. Judge Rountree sent Jake Fogg after us, but we escaped him when we first joined the wagon-train, and never saw anything more of him till he got you—till he—"

"Oh, spit it out! Ye can't hurt my feelin's. Tilt he got me to capture ye fur him. So that was what that snoozer was up to, was it? Waal, you're well shut of him, anyway."

Upon the production of the Bible, Budlong tore out the fly-leaf, declaring that he had no use for the rest, and set out on his mission of exchange, leaving his captive under a suitable guard.

As he approached, a small column of smoke ascending through the trees indicated the location of the camp he was seeking.

It was from the fire which had been built on Six-foot Si's stomach!

Dandy Dave's men were so absorbed in the barbarous proceeding that they did not discover the approach of another party till Budlong announced himself by the discharge of a revolver.

He was then seen in advance of his men, waving a handkerchief—taken from Rose!—on the end of a ramrod, as a flag of truce.

Dandy Dave instantly ejaculated:

"That's Crocker! Hyar, boys! kick that fire off, an' run the prisoner back in the bush. I'd druther stand him off with lies than fight, jest now, ef I kin. We won't be solid till we git Beth Crawford. Then if he wants to row it, I'll stand him a round or two."

The fagots were thrown off, and the fire, where Si's garments had begun to burn, beaten out.

He had as yet suffered no bodily harm, though his clothes were horribly suggestive of the torture that had been intended for him.

He was then hurried out of sight.

Dandy Dave now advanced to meet the herald.

"Waal, pardner," he said, "who be you, an' what do ye want?"

"I'm Hank Budlong, at yer sarvice, an' I want to see Six-foot Si."

"Waal, I reckon you've come to the wrong shop, pard. Thar ain't no sich person as Six-foot Si with my party," declared Dandy Dave, without blinking.

"Beggin' yer pardon, my Christian friend," said Budlong, also without blinking, "I believe ye lie!"

"What's that?" cried Dandy Dave, hotly.

"I believe ye lie," repeated Hank, calmly.

Dandy Dave's hand went round toward his revolver, but Budlong was ahead of him.

Dave waved his hand, with a laugh.

"This hyar ain't much of a truce," he said. "Let's find out whar we stand, an' then we kin settle these leetle differences of opinion afterwards."

"Suit yerself, an' you'll suit me. I'm the easiest galoot to git along with you ever see."

"Waal, then, let me say ag'in, you're on the wrong track. We're a prospectin' party, an' we don't know no such man as Six-foot Si. My name is Sauter—"

"Say, stranger," interrupted Budlong, "did Si send you out hyar to lie like this? I never'd 'a' thunk it of him. They did say as he was a man o' sand. But when I git back I'll tell the boys as he played the woman. An' that reminds me, maybe you hain't got Beth Crawford helpin' ye in your prospectin'?"

"Waal, now, you'd better believe we hain't got no Beth Crawford. What's the matter with you, pardner? You must be light in the upper story, or somebody's been givin' of you wind."

"I wish't I had your cheek—I do so! You'd orter let it out fur a lightnin'-protector. But we ain't gittin' on. Kin you read writin' when you see it?"

And Hank began to fumble in his pocket.

"I kin so," answered Dave, wondering what was coming next.

"Jest cast yer glass optic over that thar," invited Budlong, holding up the fly-leaf of Rose's Bible in a way which showed that he intended to keep possession of it while permitting Dave to read what was written:

"Rose Crawford—with loving remembrance, from her sister, Beth," read Dave, not a little astonished.

"Waal," he said, "that's middlin' fair writin', an' it's interestin' to know that sisters is lovin' together. Some ain't—not muchly! But what's all that got to do with Pete Sauter?"

"Jest you go back to Six-foot Si—or Beth Crawford, either; I ain't pertic'lar which—an' you tell 'em what you've see. An' then you tell 'em as this hyar leetle girl is jest howlin' her eyes out in my camp. An' then you tell 'em ef they don't come down with that thar blind what Joe Moran swindled Hark Budlong out of, an' they—that's Beth Crawford an' six-foot Si—collared from Joe Moran, this hyar leetle girl'll git somethin' what's worth while howlin' about. Onderstand? I mean business!"

And thrusting his head forward pugnaciously, and glaring into Dandy Dave's eyes with the scowl of an angry gorilla, Hank Budlong uttered the concluding words in a tone that left a very lively impression of his business capacity in the direction hinted at.

"Waal, Mr. Budlong," answered Dave, with a careless laugh, "it's plain to be seen that you're very much in earnest; but this looks to me like a family quarrel. It's a new way of jumpin' a claim. But ef you'll stand right hyar, whistlin' the Last Rose o' Summer, till Six-foot Si, as you call him, comes along, you'll git the chance to deliver your message yourself. If this is all you've got to say to me, I'll see ye later."

"Ye won't take this hyar word to Six-foot Si?"

"Not in time fur you to git home before sundown, ef you wait hyar fur an answer."

"Waal, then, I'll walk into your camp an' speak fur myself."

"Not ef I know it, stranger!" laughed Dandy Dave. "I'd let you count my men, an' take

whatever other leetle notes you liked, if I wasn't fully persuaded that you air an infernal scoundrel. I like a thief, I do; but I don't like a sneak-thief."

"Do you 'low as I'm only monkeyin' with you, lettin' on all this fur to git into your camp an' see whether you're a minin'-party what it'll pay to hold up?"

A question which showed that Dandy Dave's broad-gauge lying was beginning to convince Budlong that he had possibly run upon the wrong party.

"Your face is ag'in' you, pard," replied Dave, blandly. "You look as if you'd steal a pole-cat, an' then try to lie out of it when you was ketch'd with it hid in your shirt."

Hank Budlong made a belligerent movement of his hand toward his hip, but this time Dandy Dave was ahead of him.

"Waal," he said, "it's give an' take, an' we're squar' on that line. But, I'll see ye later!"

And carrying his flag of truce jauntily over his shoulder, so as to produce an effect similar to that of having cocked his hat, Hank Budlong walked off.

Dandy Dave called after him, with a laugh:

"If I ever run across a chap that answers to the name of Six-foot Si, I'll tell him that I've seen a good Injun!"

An allusion to the fact that Indians sometimes carry about letters of recommendation of very questionable reliability.

Hank Budlong had scarcely rejoined his men, when he was surprised by the approach of one who had not thus far been a member of his party.

"Waal, Cap," was the new-comer's greeting, with an amused smile, "you didn't make out overly well."

"Hallo! Is that you, Hunky-dory?" cried Budlong. "Whar have you kep' yerself all this time?"

"As close to Dandy Dave's gang as I could without gittin' ketch'd."

"Dandy Dave? Who in Cain is Dandy Dave?"

"The gent you've jest been buzzin'."

And Hunky-dory grinned again at recollection of the interview.

"But didn't I put you onto Six-foot Si; an' didn't you send Scotty to say as you had him down fine?"

"That's jest what you done, an' jest what I done."

"Then whar is he?"

"Over yon, layin' on his back in the bushes, trussed up in most scientific style by Dandy Dave."

"A prisoner? Has this chap cut in ahead of me? An' who's this hyar Dandy Dave, anyway?"

"The Royal Head-center o' Bloody Run. You orter know him."

"I'll know him better later on! But how does he come to have Six-foot Si in his clutches, an' whar's Si's men?"

Hunky-dory explained the trick by which Six-foot Si had been victimized.

"Then he's got Beth Crawford, too!" cried Budlong. "Waal, he stands in our shoes purty squar'."

Hunky-dory told of Beth's abduction by the so-called Judge Cartwright.

"An' didn't you follow 'em up?" demanded Budlong. "Thunder'n' Mars! you'd orter know that she is worth a score o' Six-foot Sies!"

"It's my hard luck to have to sleep a part o' the time, Cap," was Hunky-dory's facetious apology. "An' these hyar big things has a trick o' happenin' jest when ye're off yer base."

"Waal," growled Budlong, "it looks to me like thar was a good many fingers in this hyar pie!"

But he was destined to find the situation still further complicated, for even as he spoke a line of horsemen dashed by within stone-throw of his position, prevented from discovering his vicinity only by their preoccupation.

CHAPTER XXI.

INSIDERS AND OUTSIDERS.

AND this brings us back to Old-man Crocker, who, it will be remembered, having taken Beth Crawford a prisoner, left her under guard in company with Joe Moran, while he and his men rode away to do battle with Dandy Dave for the possession of Six-foot Si.

Old-man Crocker was in a blind rage. He had been balked so much that he longed to vent his spleen by trampling somebody to death under his feet. Of all men for this proceeding, Dandy Dave was his preference.

He knew by the report of his spy that he outnumbered Dave in force, and he resolved to dash into his camp and annihilate every one he could lay his hands upon.

Just before getting within earshot of the camp he halted his men and addressed them.

"Now, gents, how many hyar is tired o' the way things is put through at Bloody Run?"

He knew his men. They were the toughest of the tough, even in so hard a place as the Run. They longed for a continual reign of anarchy; and Dandy Dave, as bad as he was, had exercised some restraint upon them.

Without interfering with what were regarded as legitimate personal quarrels, man to man, he had declared against men hunting in packs, like wolves, in the streets of the camp.

These most desperate spirits had confederated under Old-man Crocker's leadership, in such numbers that Dandy Dave had often to wink at most flagrant breaches of the spirit, if not the letter, of the wild order he sought to preserve.

They had urged Old-man Crocker to capture the camp, and run it more in accordance with their tastes and his own; but he had held back, not seeing his way clear to success against Dandy Dave.

Now they hailed with delight his "change of heart."

"Cap," said one who constituted himself spokesman for his fellows, "you walk over Dandy Dave, an' we'll stamp him in the mud fur ye!"

"Then you foller whar I lead!" cried Crocker.

So it happened that he dashed into Dandy Dave's camp without a word of preliminaries.

He did not count on the reception he received.

Dandy Dave and his men lay in a pass, with the ground rising on either side, and made a paradise for bushwhacking warfare by bowlders and clumps of thicket.

Put on his guard against a descent by Hank Budlong, he had just got his men in position and instructed as to his method of defense, when he discovered Old-man Crocker coming.

"It's Crocker!" he cried, at the sight of his old-time rival. "Boys, thar's more in it than jest the keepin' of Six-foot Si. Now stand by me, an' you'll see that I don't furgit so easy as some. Into the bresh, boys! an' give 'em fits when ye git at 'em!"

All of his force but three, separated into about equal parties, and sprung away among the rocks and brush on either side.

Dandy Dave himself, and those who staid with him knelt abreast in the pass, making supports for their rifles by resting their elbows on their knees.

On came Old-man Crocker and his gang, brandishing their weapons and yelling like a band of Indians.

"Take 'em in the breast, boys," commanded Dandy Dave. "Mind you, one at a time, an' git as soon as you've cut loose. Take it cool! Remember, I'm number four, an' the last man on the job. Bartley, watch fur the word. Air you ready? Fire!"

"Crack!"

"Crack!"

"Crack!"

"Crack!"

"Ra-a-a-ah!" yelled Dandy Dave, as he leaped to his feet, swinging his hat about his head, and then rushed off after his fellows, who, having fired each in his turn, were now in full retreat down the pass.

Two horses were down, one on his back, with his heels flying in the air, lying directly across the way. The head of the line was thrown into confusion, those in the rear piling up at the point of obstruction.

The pause was but momentary, and then the rout swept on, like a tidal wave breaking over a reef.

Old-man Crocker had taken a flying leap over his horse's head, but seeing the kneeling line had anticipated a tumble; and he alighted on his feet.

He had scarcely touched the ground before a faithful subordinate abandoned his own saddle in favor of his chief, almost lifting him bodily from where he had fallen to the back of his new mount.

But as they passed the point where the first resistance had been offered, a rattling volley was poured into them from the rear, and leaping from the coverts on either side, the bulk of Dandy Dave's forces closed in behind them with demoniac yells and a leaden hail!

In vain did the raiders strive to check their course. Their horses were stampeded, those in the rear pressing upon those before.

The instant they heard the yell of their men, Dandy Dave and his three comrades leaped out of the trail, and making their way backward, were in an almost incredible short space of time shouting and firing from the sides of the ravine into the confused throng.

"To the brush!—take to the brush!" shouted Old-man Crocker, setting his men the example by leaping from the saddle.

But vain his commands, his appeals, his execrations. His column of men had become a mob. They were unmanageable. Few saw him; fewer yet heard him; but here and there one heeded.

In spite of his efforts to restrain them, they rushed pell-mell by, threatening to bear him down under their horses' feet.

Still worse. He soon realized that they were leaving him behind, to be captured by the enemy!

His horse was gone. In his blind determination to make a stand and fight the foe with his own tactics, he had abandoned the animal, leaving him to be swept on before the tide of terror and confusion.

Those who had followed his example soon repented of their temerity, and seeing that the

rout was beyond retrieval, had taken to their heels.

In mad fury the defeated leader drew his revolver, and deliberately shot the horse of the last of his own men as he passed him.

Then, pouring a volley into his nearing foes, he leaped away into the covert, since to go down the trail was to invite death or capture.

"After him! after him!" shouted Dandy Dave. "It's Old-man Crocker himself. A pound of gold-dust to any one who captures him, dead or alive!"

With yells of triumph, they set out in hot pursuit.

Old-man Crocker leaped from rock to rock, from covert to covert, like a mountain goat. A score of times was he shot at, but yet he kept on.

Then, back in the pass, an odd thing took place.

Dandy Dave had scarcely set his men upon Old-man Crocker, like a pack of hounds running down a fleeing stag, when he began to summon them back even more frantically.

Those who were within reach of his voice returned, to plunge instantly into a hand-to-hand encounter, compared with which their recent running fight with Old-man Crocker's party was a mere walk-over.

Upon seeing Old-man Crocker's men sweep by, Hank Budlong had demanded of his spy, Hunky-dory:

"An' who's this hyar? More o' the same crowd?"

To which Hunky-dory had replied:

"O' the same crowd? Waal, now, I reckon you wouldn't say so, ef you knowed 'em. Why, that's Old-man Crocker; an' ef he's out hyar after Dandy Dave, you bet he's bound to chaw him up."

"Is he after the cryptogram, too?"

"Waal, didn't he chase Six-foot Si clean into Mulligan's Bend? An' wouldn't he 'a' got him, but fur Dandy Dave's contrariness? You bet yer sweet life!"

"Waal, then," cried Budlong, with sudden animation, "this hyar's jest our chance. What do we want better than that? While they're rattin', we'll wade in, and clean out both crowds!"

In a moment he had formed his men, and was after Old-man Crocker.

So it came about that in the midst of his triumph over the rout of his great rival, Dandy Dave found an enemy in his rear, who threatened not only to drive him out of the post he had so gallantly defended, but to rob him of all that he had been plotting and fighting for.

If the gulch was captured, this bold outlaw would gain by battle what he had failed of by diplomacy. Six-foot Si would fall into his hands!

Gallantly did Dandy Dave's men respond to his call. Stubbornly did they oppose themselves to the charging column of the bandit.

Whether they would hold their own was still in doubt, when Old-man Crocker's rallied force returned like a recoiling wave.

Caught between the upper and nether millstones, so to speak, Dandy Dave's men turned in desperate rage upon those they had already once whipped.

Still hotly pressed by the outlaws, they were soon mingled with Crocker's force, and while they struggled hand-to-hand, the whole confused rout was once more swept out of the pass.

Hank Budlong was in possession!

High rose the yells of derisive triumph of his men till their leader checked them.

"Hold on, boys! Don't play the fool. Remember we're hyar on business. It ain't fur the fun o' cleanin' out them duffers, but it's to put money in our pockets by gittin' hold o' Six-foot Si. Now, the quicker we go fur him, the more likely we air to catch him, an' git away with him after we catch him. We can't hold this pass forever, ye onderstand."

Then they returned to look for Six-foot Si.

Meanwhile, as has been said, the men of the rivals of Bloody Run were intermingled by the fortunes of battle.

A little way below the scene of Dandy Dave's strategic move, the gulch opened out to a greater width.

On this flat the two hostile parties drew away from each other, till they had separated into clearly distinguished masses, with their leaders facing each other in the middle.

Their revolvers having long since been emptied, the rivals of Bloody Run had resorted to their bowie-knives, and now there was every prospect of a fascinating carving match.

"Stand back!" cried Old-man Crocker, waving his left hand to his men. "We don't want no interference hyar. This hyar's what we've been ripenin' fur a long time back."

He glared at Dandy Dave with a ferocious grin, thrusting his head forward with an expression of hideous blood-thirstiness.

"I reckon I'll fotch ye this time, pard," he said. "I was whettin' this hyar ole pig-stabber on my bootleg only this mornin', not 'lowin' as my first chance was to be at you."

"Ye think ye're ready?"

"I know it! I'm hungrier'n a b'ar, fur meat!"

There was a look of indecision in Dandy Dave's eyes, not of fear, but as if he were weighing some consideration.

He concluded not to broach the matter, however; for his eyes returned from their far-away look, and centered in alert intentness upon Old-man Crocker's face.

"Go in!" he said, quietly.

"D'ye want to peel?"

"No!"

"We've been sich a long time gittin' around to this, we'd orter do it upscientific, jest to please the boys. Thar's a heap in looks, ye know."

"I have no time to waste on looks."

"Oh, ef ye're ho-o-ongrly!" said Old-man Crocker, and immediately threw himself into position, only stopping to roll up his shirt-sleeve away from his wrist.

Then the antagonists began slowly and cautiously to creep backward and forward, and circle around each other, the eyes of each riveted upon the eyes of his foe.

It is the eye that tells the story. Every man who has engaged in boxing or fencing knows that the intention first appears here. A furtive glance precedes the blow.

The effect upon the spectators of this creeping watchfulness was thrilling to behold.

They watched as intently, the blood fading from their faces with sympathetic excitement. Their bodies swayed with the advance and retreat, the half-formed purpose and the forego of it registered in the tension and relaxation of the muscles, the abrupt halt and the resumption of movement, of the combatants. They winced, they gasped, they uttered a sigh or a smothered curse, as now this contestant, now that, passed under the shadow of peril.

Presently Dandy Dave, balancing himself cat-like on his toes, so that he could leap back or sway his body out of reach on the slightest suspicion of need, quickly advanced his knife so as to oppose its edge to that of Old-man Crocker, pressing it down and away to one side.

Down they went slowly, till they nearly touched the ground, the men bending forward and their heads approaching, till they stared into each other's eyes at a distance of scarcely more than a foot.

Not a word, not a sound, escaped their tight-locked lips; not a muscle in their faces moved, though they could almost feel each other's breath.

This was a trial of the muscles of the wrist.

The spectators watched it breathlessly.

Now, with a quick, strong, decisive movement, the knives swung to the other side, then upward, till they were extended to the highest reach above the antagonist's heads. There they swayed, then swept swiftly round, and swiftly parted company.

But almost instantly they were together again, now striking—*clash! clash! clash!* The men look demoniac as their bodies sway from side to side, now advancing, now retreating, now circling round, now standing firm in stubborn resistance of encroachment!

Once more the weapons grind hard, the muscles strain, the veins swell into whipcords, the forehead becomes purple.

Suddenly Old-man Crocker frees his knife, and makes a desperate lunge.

A gasp of apprehension sweeps through one party, like a flurry of wind in a chaparral. A half-uttered "*Ah!*" bursts from the other.

But the deadly blade is caught on the edge of the other, hissing along it till the hilt strikes, when it is swept aside, its point passing so close to Dandy Dave's broad breast as almost to tear his shirt.

The terrific force with which he hurls it aside fairly twists Crocker's body, and Dave's return is like lightning.

"I have you!" he cries.

An instant his keen point seems to fairly prick the quivering flesh.

Old-man Crocker makes a wild pass, and succeeds in parrying the blow; but, as Dave leaps back with a light laugh, all of his own men and most of Crocker's feel that, had he cared to press his advantage, Dave could have ended the rivalry there and then.

A yell of triumph, blended with wonder at his forbearance, bursts from one crowd; the other utters a snarl of defiance, but with a scowl of rage that is indicative of conscious defeat.

"Waal," said Dave, "now that I've proved that I ain't like to take water in a mill o' this kind with you, I've a proposition to make."

"What proposition?" demanded Crocker, rather sullenly.

"I wish to state, by way of preface, that me an' you air two fools. While we're wranglin' over a thing that kin be settled 'most any time, another feller is runnin' away with our cheese. So, whichever wins, we're both left."

"What cheese?" asked Crocker.

"Why, Six-foot Si, o' course, with the cryptogram in his pocket, or in his head—it don't make much matter which."

"An' what air you goin' to do about it?"

"I propose that we call this thing off fur the present, join forces, an' clean out this hyar road-agent, Hank Budlong. He must have Si

by this time, an' we'll have to capture him back."

"Waal," said Old-man Crocker, "he's an outsider, an' that's a fact."

"That's my idee," responded Dave. "The men o' Bloody Run joins hands ag'in' outsiders, whatever leetle accounts they have to settle among themselves."

"We've always done that so far."

"Is it a go, then?"

"I'm agreeable."

Dandy Dave offered his hand in guaranty of good faith.

Old-man Crocker took it as a medieval baron would make a truce with his ancestral enemy for the purposes of a Crusade.

The men formed in separate parties, some clannishly sullen, but most disposed to treat the matter as a joke.

Dandy Dave was magnanimous, or shrewd enough to arrange that Crocker's men should go in advance of his own, though he rode at the head of the column at the side of his late mortal enemy, to guide them to the spot where Six-foot Si ought to be found, if he had not yet been captured by Hank Budlong.

Those at the head of Dandy Dave's column were soon chaffing those at the rear of Old-man Crocker's.

"We'd 'a' got away with ye, Johnny, ef we couldn't 'a' turned ye to better account another way."

"Your chance is good fur another racket. Meanwhile, till you show up somethin' more substantial than chin-music, we lead you."

"Oh, you're in the right place; only you'd orter be on the double-quick."

"We was put in front to kill us off, so's you sneaks wouldn't have so many to fight when it come to the grand round-up."

"Thar's whar ye're off, Johnny. We was put behind to keep you cowards from runnin' away."

But there was neither killing off nor running away in this campaign; for when they came upon the enemy, they found him displaying a flag of truce.

"That's a great trick of his!" said Dandy Dave. "But ef he makes any points this game, it will be because that infernal cook's drug ain't out o' my head yet."

"Hang his white flag!" growled Old-man Crocker. "To my way o' thinkin', thar oughtn't to be no let-up till he shows the white feather."

Nevertheless he accompanied Dandy Dave to the parley.

CHAPTER XXII.

THE BEGINNING OF THE END.

BELIEVING that Rose and her brothers were in the power of Jake Fogg, as the agent of Judge Rountree, and that the most they had to fear was a persistence in the effort to get Rose's fortune, Bowie-knife 'Bijah's chief anxiety was for the condition of Bareback Buck.

"Thar hain't nothin' like bein' disapp'inted in love, fur them tender chickens," he reflected, as sagely as if he spoke from extended experience, instead of entirely from hearsay. "She'll cry her sweet eyes out, ef he goes up the flume. Ef I kin fetch him around, I reckon he'll be more than a match fur Jim Rountree an' Jake Fogg together."

Buck seemed all right, except that he was overcome with drowsiness; and having dressed his wounds as best he could, 'Bijah let him alone.

Chinny Charley's treacherous bullet had plowed a path through Buck's hair, scoring the scalp in a way that promised to leave him a life remembrance of that day's battle.

"If it's cracked his skull," reflected 'Bijah, "he'll want a better man than me to pull him through; but ef it hain't, I reckon sleep'll do him more good than anythin' else. Anyway, we'll wait till mornin', an' then ef he ain't no better, I'll try to pack him to whar he kin git doctored in the right kind o' shape."

Buck slept straight through the rest of that day and until daylight the next morning; but then 'Bijah was delighted to see him awake, to all seeming his old self again.

"I was afeard you was a goner, ole man," he said, squeezing Buck's hand with emotion. "But now we'll go fur 'em ag'in'!"

"I reckon it was the shock in a general way," observed Buck, feeling of his head. "At any rate, I'm all right now, and you'd better believe we will go fur 'em ag'in'!"

His first discovery was his peerless Pard patiently awaiting his appearance before the stronghold. This caused him uneasiness, fearing that Rose had been thrown, till 'Bijah assured him that he had seen her still mounted in the hands of the enemy.

"Then it is a good omen!" he declared. "They couldn't keep my glorious old Pard!"

And he caressed the animal affectionately.

The next important discovery was the wounded man that Hank Budlong had left behind him.

To him they appealed for information as to the fate of Rose and her brothers, their fears

revivified on the discovery of the dead Jake Fogg.

"Pards," said the outlaw, scanning their faces searchingly, "will you pass yer word to look after me ef I tell ye all I know?"

"We'll do what we can for you, of course," answered Buck, promptly, "after we have first recovered our friends."

"Waal, I reckon that's the best thing I kin do. Them galoots said they would pick me up on their way back, but they're like to furgit a poor devil mighty easy, ef it don't pay to remember him."

He then told of Fogg's death and the purpose to which Rose was now to be put.

"Then it is really true that Beth Crawford and Six-foot Si are in this vicinity, looking for the Lost Mine?" cried Buck. "I was afraid it was only a part of the ruse to inveigle us away here so's we could be captured with impunity."

"Cap Budlong figgered on his scheme from the time he hyeared her name—"

"Then we shall have to be on the lookout for the other party. But we'll have to be careful not to walk up to yours by mistake."

"Boss, ef you kin git a squint at Beth Crawford, you won't make no mistake."

"Of course not. It isn't likely that your people have a woman with them, except the one we know too well to mistake."

"Oh, thar's jest whar you'd be out. It's a Greaser you must look fur. Ef you see a Greaser you're solid. That's Beth Crawford, sure."

And to his not slight astonishment Buck learned of Beth's disguise.

He was indebted to the wounded outlaw for his breakfast, though, truth to tell, he did not stop for much, and then they set out.

They had gone but a little way, when they espied some one moving near them. It was evident that they had been discovered, for the man tried to hide.

That was enough. He must be captured at all hazards, to guard against his betraying them, even if he did not waylay them and pick them off before they had a chance at him.

"After him! after him!" cried Buck, and away they coursed.

The chase was a hot one, but Buck was fleet of foot, and finally brought the fugitive to bay.

"Stand off!" he cried. "I'll never be taken alive!"

He had taken up his position behind a rock, around the edge of which he peered, the muzzle of his revolver also appearing to view at a little lower level.

"We'll see about that!" declared 'Bijah.

"Pard, you stay hyar, and I'll git around in his rear."

But instead of persisting in his hostile attitude, Bareback Buck straightened up so as to present a fair mark for the fugitive, crying:

"I say, thar, pardner, who air you, anyway? Show up so's we kin see your face. I'd ought to know that yawp."

"Is that you, Bareback Buck? Waal! waal! waal!"

And, while 'Bijah gaped with astonishment, the fugitive stepped boldly forth from behind his shelter, and advanced with outstretched hand and a smile of glad recognition.

"It ain't anybody else," replied Buck, as he wrung the proffered hand. "I thought I'd ought to know old Doc Cranch as far as I could smell his breath! But what in the world air you doin' out hyar?"

"I've been consortin' with the peskiest lot of villains it was ever my lot to fall amongst. But I shook 'em as soon as I found 'em out. But now there are three of us, we'd ought to be strong enough to do somethin'. I left a mighty good man in a mighty dirty hole, an' I'll be glad to git you to help me pull him out."

"Turn and turn about; only as we captured you, we'll hold you to help us first. But who's yer man?"

"Six-foot Si. A—"

"No! You don't say! Were you with him?"

"To my sorrow."

"Then you can tell us whether a lady by the name of Beth Crawford was of your party."

"Thar wa'n't no lady with us. It would be a poor place for one. We were out lookin' fur a mine, with such a chance of bein' picked up by a little army o' ruffians, that I was taken along to look out for the wounded."

Buck's face dropped.

"That infernal rascal lied to us!" he cried. "He told us that Beth Crawford was with you, disguised as a Mexican."

"As a what?" ejaculated the surgeon, with a sudden gleam of intelligence. "No! You don't say so! Waal, now, that accounts for it. I will be hanged!"

And Doc went off in a chuckle of amusement.

"What's the matter?" cried Buck, with keen interest.

"Matter! Why, that Six-foot Si—as innocent as a baby, you'd say—is the biggest fraud on record. He had a woman along with him, an' passed her off on us as a Greaser, an' a dumb Greaser at that. But then," with a sudden change of expression, "if that's so, she is in trouble."

And he told of the drugging, and Beth's mysterious disappearance.

"Let us lose no more time!" exclaimed Buck. "There may be more work before us than we dream of. What a hotbed of rascality we have all fallen into."

They resumed their way, advancing rapidly, yet cautiously.

Suddenly they were stopped by a voice shouting:

"Blast yer eyes, I say no!"

"But I say yes!" insisted another voice, not less angrily.

"What was it Tony?" appealed the first speaker. "I say it was clubs, an' this hyar's the right bower."

"But I say it was spades, an' this hyar is the right bower."

"Whether spades or clubs," answered one who had not spoken before, "it would be all day with you two fools—an' sarve ye right, too—ef Cap was to hyear you yellin' out like that."

"But my money's up on it!" protested the first speaker. "I don't let no man swindle me out o' my money!"

"Blast ye! do you tell me as I'm tryin' to swindle ye?"

"I tell ye that you'll never smell that money on no spade."

"An' I tell the pair o' ye!" cried Tony, "that I'll lay you both out cold before I'll let you git me into a scrape with Cap. He don't stop to ask who's at fault when anythin' goes wrong. He jest lays about him, an' every one in reach ketches it. You know that."

"Hold on, gentlemen," pleaded another voice, tremulous with fear or weakness. "You kin let that stand over, an' settle it between ye 'most any time."

The voices then dropped lower, but it was some time before amicable feelings were restored.

The conclusion was a new hand, each of the disputants swearing that he would put a bullet through his adversary if he caught him up to any tricks in that deal.

Then all was silence, in the absorption of the test hand.

"Now's our time to take a look at those gentlemen," said Bareback Buck.

And noiselessly he crept toward the scene of contention.

Bowie-knife 'Bijah quickly followed him, and Doc Cranch brought up the rear.

They discovered the Greaser of whom they had been talking, Joe Moran in his litter, and the three guards gambling, to the neglect of their duty.

Without a word, Bareback Buck drew his bowie and held it up before his comrades.

They comprehended this pantomime without explanation.

Their work must be swift, silent, decisive! In the dangerous mission they were upon they must let no false mercy stay their hands. They were fighting desperately wicked men, in the defense of innocent and helpless women, and they could afford to take no risks.

Buck crept a little nearer, making room for his comrades to come abreast with him.

Their bowies were ready. At a given signal they silently rose to their feet. Then came the rush!

It was over, almost in a moment, without the discharge of a weapon, with but one outcry, and that not loud enough to go far.

Bowie-knife 'Bijah stood over Joe Moran, menacing him with his freshly ensanguined blade.

Doc Cranch was addressing Beth, reassuringly:

"Don't be afeard, ma'am! We're your friends. You may recognize me. I was with Six-foot Si. I'm the saw-bones."

Bareback Buck was busy binding a prisoner. At the last moment his heart had failed him. Seeing the fellow so completely at his mercy, he could not but spare him.

"It's a life, though a villainous one, no doubt," he reflected. "I reckon he'll live to do more harm. But if we were to wipe out everybody likely to do more mischief than good in the world, it would be hard to draw the line, an' the earth would be a reeking shambles. I'll leave him for some Vigilance Committee, or some scoundrel like himself to finish off."

Having leaped to her feet in dismay, Beth stared from one to another, to be more struck by Bowie-knife 'Bijah than by Doc Cranch.

"And you, 'Bijah?" she cried, advancing swiftly toward him.

'Bijah, whose truculent countenance was striking terror to Joe Moran, looked up with his old-time grin.

"It's me, Miss Beth," he answered, "an' right glad I am to see ye lookin' so well."

And as he delivered himself of this absurd formula, 'Bijah dropped his eyes, with a wave of color to the roots of his hair, overcome with embarrassment at seeing Beth in her unwomanly attire.

"But what are you doing here? How came you West; and above all how do you happen to be just here, and at just this time?"

It was on the tip of 'Bijah's tongue to reveal the whole truth; then it occurred to him to

spare her anxiety as long as possible. Somehow, as foolish as 'Bijah looked, he always "got thar all the same."

"Waal, ye know, I've always had a hanker-in' fur the West, an' gittin' a chance to come with B'arback Buck, hyar, as knows all about the country, I 'lowed as it was as good a time as any, an' come along. Then I hyeared as you was in trouble, an' o' course I wouldn't give ye the go-by, fur old acquaintance."

There was a little trip in that, but Beth had been in so much trouble of late that she did not apply it to her more recent difficulty, as 'Bijah meant it.

"And how are all the people at home?" she asked, eagerly.

"They are all in good health," answered 'Bijah, compounding with his conscience for the equivocation. "Leastways, they was when I seen 'em last."

"My sister, and Cass and Mart?"

"It would do yer heart good to see 'em, Miss Beth!" declared 'Bijah, thinking that it would do his heart good too.

Satisfied on this score, Beth's thoughts turned to another, whose unknown fate had filled her with a poignancy of anguish which a few hours ago she would not have believed possible. So insensibly do we become enmeshed in the strongest ties of our lives.

"Oh!" she suddenly ejaculated, turning to Doc Cranch, "you can tell me what has happened."

"Six-foot Si is in a hopple," he answered, "but we air on our way now to git him out."

"Can you do it? Will you do it?"

"Waal, you kin bet yer sweet life we'll bu'st somethin' a-tryin'!"

Doc was already a captive to the charm of Beth Crawford's voice, and fell to anathematizing Six-foot Si, in a good-natured way, for depriving him of this delightful sensation for so long.

He expressed himself forcibly, because he felt that, having once "cut loose" in her defense, he should weigh a ton, and be able to crack walnuts between his finger-joints.

"Oh, if you could!" cried the girl, turning her appealing eyes upon Bareback Buck.

And despite the silken mustache on her lip, Buck was ready to meet all comers in maintenance of the averment that, in all the wide world, there was but one sweeter and more beautiful woman than the one before him.

If he deferred Beth's cause, it could only be in favor of Rose.

"Come!" he said, "let us lose no more time."

Joe Moran uttered no word of protest or complaint, as he saw the woman he loved turn from him without a backward glance, evidently without a thought, to go eagerly, tremulously to another!

As they neared the camp where Rose was held a prisoner, the sounds of battle burst upon the air.

"It is Old-man Crocker fighting out his grudge with Dandy Dave!" exclaimed Beth. "Let us hasten! We may be able to save him while they are occupied with each other."

It was plain that she expected to take part in the rescue, woman though she was.

"But there is another," interposed Bareback Buck. "'Bijah, have you watched the trail? Can Budlong have given us the slip?"

"Not so fur," declared 'Bijah, positively. "You bet I've kept my eyes peeled too long to fall to blinkin' now. He's on ahead some'rs, sure."

They hastened on, Beth in her excitement pressing before Buck and 'Bijah, who were busy scanning either side of the trail.

"Be careful! You will betray us!" Buck called to her, guardedly.

But he broke off, to exclaim with intense excitement:

"Hyar! hyar! Look, 'Bijah!"

And he pointed to hoof-tracks leading off from the trail.

Almost at the same instant a shrill scream rent the air, followed by a man's shout of angry command.

CHAPTER XXIII.

QUICK WORK.

BAREBACK BUCK and 'Bijah look up wildly, and with a united burst of rage tore away, leaving Beth and Doc Cranch staring after them.

Beth was electrified by the woman's voice rising again, now musically clear, in spite of its intensity, because it was wedded to speech.

"Buck! Buck! Oh, Buck!"

There could be but one meaning in those tones. It was an outburst of love.

Beth, with her heart in a strange tumult, drove her spurs into her horse's flanks, and reined him out of the path, to leap through a thicket.

In the open beyond, she saw a girl running toward her, pursued by a brace of ruffians, who had just pulled up at sight of Buck and 'Bijah.

Her rescuers passed Rose like hounds in full cry. It was nip and tuck between them. They made a splendid pair!

Rose clasped her hand above her head, and turned round to follow them with her eyes as

they sped past, laughing hysterically and murmuring confused words of gratitude and endearment.

But Beth recognized her, and cried in wonder and alarm:

"Rose! Rose! Oh, what are you doing here?"

At the sound of that voice Rose turned with glad expectancy in her face, but seeing no one but a Mexican cavalier riding toward her, called:

"Beth! It is you! I know your voice! But where are you?"

"Here! here! Don't you know me? Oh, my dear!"

And off went her sombrero; off came the handkerchief beneath it; and down fell her glorious hair, like the crown of an Eve, or a Godiva.

As she drew her horse upon his haunches, she swung from the saddle, and the loving sisters were swallowed up in each other's embrace.

Doc Cranch, who had followed Beth, did not know which to envy most; but when he had a chance for a good square look at Rose, he proved the fickleness of the heart of man, by deciding that he would take the lips without a moustache "in his"—if he could have got 'em!

But Buck and 'Bijah were returning.

"Now for Six-foot Si!" cried the former. "Doc, you stay hyar with the ladies till we return. We won't come back without him if it is a possible thing."

This last was addressed to Beth.

"Oh, but we shall accompany you!" she exclaimed.

"Pardon me! but you could only impede our movements, besides, perhaps, increasing our danger. This is work in which numbers do not count so much as quickness. We can do nothing by force against so many. Believe me, it is best that you stay hyar, in readiness for instant flight."

He concluded while bending down to Rose, who came running to him with outstretched arms, uttering his name with a murmur of exquisite tenderness.

"Put your foot on mine," he whispered.

And with a glad bound she was seated before him on Pard's withers, folded in his strong arms, with her lips to his.

'Bijah kept on without pause. Buck followed more slowly, having a word with his darling between their separations.

"Ah!" she murmured, hanging back as far as her arms would permit with her hands clasped behind his neck, so that she could look him over, "my brave scout, you are alive! you are strong! you are not seriously hurt! O-o-o-h!"

And with a swift movement she was back again, with her warm breath on his lips.

"And you, my darling?"

"I?" she cried, her eyes alight. "I shall never know a moment like this again—never!"

"You shall have a whole lifetime of them!"

But her cheek, now wet with tears, was against his. Her lips were at his ear.

"Be careful—oh, be careful!" she whispered.

"Remember, you carry my heart on your breast. No bullet can strike you without first piercing it!"

Then with a quivering sob she slipped to the ground, to run back and fling herself into her sister's arms.

Beth strained her to her breast and kissed her with a stormy passion of tenderness which bewildered and frightened herself.

Why was she so tumultuously happy? Why should she be grateful to Rose, as if she had received some priceless boon from her? Why was she overcome by a swooning sadness? Why did every nerve in her body suddenly thrill with a wild terror, till it seemed as if she could not restrain herself, but must spur after Bareback Buck, and plunge into the battle with a fury all out of keeping with her womanhood?

Meanwhile Bareback Buck and bowie-knife 'Bijah sped on, entering the pass during the stubborn stand of Dandy Dave's victors against Hank Budlong and his men.

Buck took one side and 'Bijah the other, beating the coverts, and shouting:

"Six-foot Si! Six-foot Si!"

"Hyar! hyar! hyar!" roared a stentorian voice; and stimulated by the hope of liberty, the giant threw all of his strength into a single Herculean effort, and burst his bonds like withes.

He released only his hands, however. The ligatures that bound his feet held fast.

But with a wriggle that would have done credit to any acrobat, he hurled his body over the ground, and seized by the ankle one of his guards who was in the act of firing at Bareback Buck.

"Hyar! hyar! hyar!" he bellowed, as he dragged the fellow to the ground and seized him by the throat.

He missed the revolver that flew from his prisoner's hand just as it was exploding. But he tore the other from his belt, and with it put a shot clean through the body of the other guard.

Then he drew his prisoner's bowie, freed him-

self with a slash between his ankles, and rose to his feet, lifting his captive with him.

But he thrust him headforemost into a thicket as Buck dashed up, shouting:

"Hyar, pard! Up behind me! Lively! lively! Those fellows may be back any minute. We'll pick up Beth Crawford on our way back. She's safe."

Si needed no second bidding. Buck seized him by the shoulder, and leaned far over to the other side of his horse. Si stepped upon his extended foot, and with a bound secured his place behind him.

'Bijah, having crossed from the other side of the pass, was in full cry after Si's third guard.

It was important to allow nobody to escape, to bring pursuers on their track. While the battle occupied them, let them remain in ignorance of their loss.

Still, the fellow had such a start that Buck called off the pursuit.

'Bijah had already had three or four shots at the fugitive; but the motion of his horse and the running of the outlaw combined to make them ineffectual.

However, he resolved to make one last effort, and drawing a bowie, the Knife Champion rose in his stirrups and hurled the missile with all his might, his two waiting pards beholding the signal feat.

The distance was full twice as great as he had ever attempted before; but his brain was aflame with the fire of battle, and his arm was nerved with the strength of the old Vikings, some of whose blood coursed in his veins; and the flying weapon took the ruffian fairly between the shoulder-blades, penetrating his body to the hilt, and dropping him as if he had been struck by lightning.

Then out of the pass of death, and away!

When Six-foot Si stood face to face with Beth Crawford once more, he only took her hand, without a word. But their eyes met in a glance most eloquent!

There was but one further consideration of primal importance—Cass and Mart.

Their sisters, ready for any self-sacrifice, insisted that they should proceed no further till the boys were found; but Buck urged differently, and was seconded by Six-foot Si.

The boys were together, so that they could sustain each other in fortitude. Then Cass was shrewd enough, if not to find his way out of the wilderness, at least to preserve himself and Mart from actual starvation for a few days. Meanwhile, having got the girls in safety, Si and Buck would head a reliable party to come in quest of them.

So confident did they appear of the boys' ample ability to look out for themselves, that the girls yielded to the natural buoyancy of feeling that followed as a reaction from their late despondency, upon their reunion with the men to whom they looked for guidance and protection.

Doc Cranch had tried to get a horse for Rose, and another to hold in readiness for Si. But, one way or another, Hank Budlong had had more horses disabled than men, so that only one was left with the party that guarded Rose; and during the chase and firing in her rescue, that one had broken away, and ran so wildly that Doc was afraid to leave the ladies in his pursuit.

Bareback Buck was only too glad of an excuse to carry Rose before him; Rose herself did not seem averse to this method of transportation; and Pard, if he had been asked, would have laughed to scorn, in an equine way, the idea that the additional weight of the little beauty would overtax his magnificent strength.

Six-foot Si ran beside Beth's horse, with a hand twined in his mane.

They were advancing promisingly, expecting to secure the needed mounts where Joe Moran yet lay in his litter, if he had not changed his position, taking with him the remaining animal of the three guards, which was not needed when Doc Cranch and 'Bijah appropriated the other two.

Without a warning sight or sound, a pistol suddenly flashed beside their path, and while the crags yet rung with its sharp report, Beth, her horse, and Six-foot Si went to the ground in a heap!

Rose, who had been gazing into her lover's eyes with a smile that needed no words for its interpretation, turned her head; and while her scream of dismay thrilled in the air, Buck shouted:

"Halt!"

Pard settled back on his haunches, stopping quite abruptly, yet with his back at such an angle as not to pitch his rider up on his neck; and Buck, swinging Rose clear, and setting her on her feet as lightly as a feather, turned his horse, almost without a pause, toward the man who had fired the shot.

But Bowie-knife 'Bijah was ahead of him. With a jab of the spur he leaped his horse over an intervening thicket, and was upon the murderer.

With a curse the stranger turned his revolver upon his assailant; but in the midst of his second bound 'Bijah's horse tossed his head at the flash of the weapon, and went to the earth with a crash.

Before either Doc Cranch or Buck could fire upon him, the assassin turned his revolver against himself, and sent a bullet crashing through his own brain!

'Bijah, who was rolled almost to his feet, scrambled up, too much excited to notice the bruises he had received; and as he gazed at the man who had just attempted his life, he cried in amazement:

"Why, it's Jim Rountree! Miss Rosy—Miss Rosy! it's Jim Rountree!"

Rose had already sought her sister's side, and was clinging to her in tears, insisting that she must be hurt somewhere, though Beth assured her to the contrary.

Jim Rountree's shot had evidently been aimed at Six-foot Si, winged on its deadly errand by his jealousy. Missing the man, it had penetrated to the horse's vitals, and as he fell, Si had caught Beth, to be overborne by the impetus of her body.

In Jim Rountree, Six-foot Si recognized the man he had believed in even after most men would have begun to doubt him.

Beth had said nothing in explanation of her mysterious disappearance, and Si, with that fine instinct which stood him in the stead of conventional breeding, had refrained from any allusion to it, awaiting her pleasure.

Now their eyes met, and he understood that this was a matter which was not to be disturbed for the present. If their lives became interwoven, she might tell him all, some day.

And now, when they were fairly afoot, their enemies were upon them. Through a vista in the rocks and foliage they caught sight of them, and came on with yells and execrations.

"We've only two hosses amongst us," said Doc Cranch. "Hyar, Buck!—you mount Miss Crawford on my boss, take Miss Rose up before us, an' cl'ar out! We kin shift fur ourselves."

But a glance showed that Doc's horse was not fit for such a race. It would be certain capture to Beth in the end, even if Buck escaped with Rose; and though she was the dearest object in life to him, he could not think of separating the sisters in that way.

"I have a better plan," he said. "We are near the rocks where you stood them off, 'Bijah, while I did nothing but snooze. We will go back thar, and be in safety while we make terms with them. It is the cryptogram they are all after, and we will give it to them. After the ladies are safe, it will be queer to me if they get much good out of it."

"But suppose we can't buy off with the cryptogram now?" asked Doc Cranch. "Thar's been a pile o' blood let over that thing. Suppose they ask for more, havin' us dead to rights, ye understand?"

"We'll have to risk it," answered Buck. "We shall be forced to make a stand somewhere, and thar may not be another place whar we kin keep them off long enough to make a proposition."

So they sought this unpromising refuge, and a few minutes later were shut in by a mob fairly howling for blood.

Buck had not fully realized the fury of the men. He now saw, when it was too late, that, even if the leaders consented, it might be impossible to satisfy their followers with anything short of the lives of all.

CHAPTER XXIV.

THE TRIPLE DUEL.

WHEN Dandy Dave and Old-man Crocker went to the truce to which they were invited by Hank Budlong, the bully of Bloody Run, after his brutal custom, tried to "sit down" on the outlaw.

He sat down on a thorn!

"Look a-hyar!" was his greeting, with a scowl intended to browbeat his opponent into subjection, "ye want to cut this hyar business mighty short. We don't 'low to dance any to speak of, to your fiddlin'. You've got in on us while our backs was turned, an' we're waitin' to git squar."

"Don't you git buffy about it, my Christian friend," said Budlong, not scaring "worth a cent." "I hain't disturbed anythin' that belonged to you."

"It would 'a' belonged to me before long, ef you hadn't dipped—"

"Waal, now, that's what I call a hard cheek!" laughed Budlong. "When I dipped in, it seems to me that a gent of about your build was on the dead run. How did it strike you, boss?"

But Dandy Dave did not receive this appeal kindly. He was faithful to the traditions of Bloody Run, not to let outsiders make or meddle in its internal dissensions.

"That's nuther hyar nor thar," he replied, coldly. "What do you want with this rag?"

And he flung his hand contemptuously out at Budlong's flag of truce.

"I want to strike a partnership with you fellers," answered the outlaw, "as I see you have done with each other."

"We ain't up fur no partnership," declared Dave, brusquely.

"That jest depends," said Budlong, not at all

disturbed. "I've got the sister of this hyar Beth Crawford—"

"That ain't good, stranger. We ain't givin' a rap fur nobody's sister."

"Waal, that jest depends," repeated Budlong, with a drawl.

"What we're after," interposed Crocker, "is Six-foot Si, an' ef you don't come down with him without no ifs nor buts, we'll rub you out, an' take him!"

"Six-foot Si?" repeated Budlong, as if he were a personage who had not been at all in consideration. "Oh! ef I had him, I wouldn't trouble myself to talk to you gents at all."

"If you had him?" cried Dandy Dave.

"If I had him," repeated Budlong, gravely.

"You have got him!"

"I think you lie!"

"Whar is he, then?"

Dave began to hope that Si's guards had evinced more faithfulness and expertness than he had given them credit for.

"A gentleman of my acquaintance—a quite recent acquaintance—one Bareback Buck, as I have reason to suspect, has come in behind me, an' run him off before I could get back from cleanin' you chaps out o' the pass."

"Air you givin' us that straight?"

"As straight as I know it myself."

"An' what do you propose?"

"That we lump our forces, an' git Six-foot Si ef we kin. If we do, we divvy up the proceeds o' the game, whatever they be, share an' share alike, three equal parts, one to each of us three, an' each to settle with his men ef he kin."

"That's middlin' good fur you, ef we do git him. Now, what ef we don't?"

"Why, then we trade my prisoner for the cryptogram, an' divvy up the same."

Dave looked thoughtful. He could see both advantages and disadvantages in this arrangement. Presently it occurred to him to see how Budlong himself balanced them.

"Suppose we say no?" he suggested.

"Waal," answered Hank, complacently, "you'll have to fight me, sure! Ye see, I'll be interested in his gittin' away; fur I kin trade any time I git ready. The girl is good. She'll keep."

It was plain that this impressed Dandy Dave. He was a man of quick decisions. He now almost instantly turned to Old-man Crocker.

"What do you say?"

"Oh! I say nothin'."

There was a shrewd reason for this indifference. Nothing had been said about Beth, whom Crocker believed that he yet held.

If he kept out of this agreement and succeeded in getting the cipher out of Beth, he would be under no obligation of any sort.

If he failed there, he could then fall back on these other two chances.

"Do you leave it to me?" asked Dave.

"Ain't it your own prisoner?" asked Crocker.

"I hain't got nothin' to do with it till you have him in your hands ag'in."

"But if we git him, you won't go back on this agreement?"

"No."

"Then I say—Go ahead!" declared Dandy Dave.

He shook Budlong's hand, in ratification.

"When the outlaw offered the same hand to Old-man Crocker, he looked at it coolly, with a shrug of his shoulders.

"This ain't no funeral o' mine," he said. "Your arrangement is with Dandy Dave. You git one third, an' he gits two thirds, of what you make out o' this thing."

"An' whar do you come in?" asked Budlong.

"That's a thing you ain't like to understand. Dandy Dave an' me belongs to Bloody Run. You're an outsider."

"Oh, waal," said the outlaw, "as long as I git my one-third, no matter which way she jumps, I ain't kickin'."

On this agreement they set out, Hank Budlong's outlaws very contentedly falling into the rear of Dandy Dave's forces, while their leader rode in advance with the other two chiefs.

As they passed the spot where Hank expected to find his prisoner, the distance from the trail was so small that he summoned her guard with a shout.

He seemed to be surprised at receiving no response, and still more so on discovering that Rose was gone.

"I reckon, gents," he said, "that this won't make no difference with our contract. We're all in the same boat."

There was a look in his eye that Dandy Dave interpreted as intimating that he would, out of sheer contrariety, do his best to balk the pursuit of Six-foot Si, if the agreement was now receded from.

"He has used us," said Dave to himself, "but we couldn't help ourselves, anyway."

Old-man Crocker only smiled sarcastically.

But later the laugh turned against him.

He would have passed without sign the point where he supposed Beth to be, but that the horses that bore Joe Moran's litter were discovered wandering aimlessly about not far from the trail, the animal in advance leisurely cropping such tufts of grass as he found, while his fellow in the rear with but indifferent success

strove to reach the same luxury over the pole of the litter.

Here Moran was found lying almost unconscious. At Old-man Crocker's savage address he opened his eyes heavily, but with scarce intelligence in his gaze. He was past the power of speech, which so enraged his guardian that he would have shaken the life out of him but for Dandy Dave's interference.

"Hold on, Crocker," he said. "He's mighty nigh out o' the reach o' your tender mercies. Your nursin' don't seem to agree with him."

Joe turned his eyes upon Dave, and let them rest on his face while they slowly glazed over, and he passed out with no further sign.

But, not waiting for the end, Old-man Crocker plunged headlong into the waste off the trail, to the spot where he now expected to find only disappointment.

He found it!

On his return he said not a word, but his face was a study.

Hank Budlong now smiled. Dandy Dave alone appeared unmoved. However, he understood.

Then the pursuit was resumed with a savage earnestness which showed that they all now realized that they were indeed "in the same boat," and all was at stake, as at the beginning.

So they came to the spot where the fugitives had taken refuge, to make their stand and negotiate.

It was soon apparent that they could not be dislodged as long as their ammunition held out, since they could block the entrance to their stronghold with dead bodies, as fast as their enemies could clear it and give them more material.

Then they were ready to listen to a parley, and Six-foot Si made his proposal.

They, with many unnecessary expletives, assured him that they would see him hanged first. They were now after blood, as well as gold. They would starve him and his company out before they raised the siege.

Without food—above all without water—the end could not be far off!

But ere long came a straggler from Old-man Crocker's party, who had kept up his flight further than his fellows, till from a peak of rock he made a discovery on which he now reported.

"Cap, thar's a raft o' fellers comin' this way, an' they're comin' fast! If you've got anythin' to do hyar, ye want to cut it short."

Investigation proved the truth of this, and threw some more light on it, which made Hank Budlong swear lustily at something with reference to which he did not take his colleagues into his confidence. But this much he did say:

"Gents, they're comin' fur us—I know it! Cut this hyar short—deuced short!"

Dandy Dave and Old-man Crocker looked into his eyes and saw that he was in earnest. Then a hurried consultation followed, and a flag of truce was the result.

"Waal, what's wanted?" asked Six-foot Si.

"We've been considerin' this case," answered Dandy Dave, "an' this is the conclusion we've come to. We don't want to hang around hyar fur days, while we git almost as good appetites as you folks do, though o' course we've got whisky an' tobacker to take the curse off, which the same you hain't. What we're after is the cryptogram an' satisfaction; an' we kin git both a heap quicker another way, ef you're agreeable."

"What do you propose?"

"Jest this:

"You've got three good fightin' men in thar, an' we've got three good fightin' men out hyar. Now, we'll stand you even, the victors to sweep the board!"

Si asked time to consult with his friends, and he was told to take his time, but make it as short as was convenient, so as to leave his besiegers time before dark, if their overture was declined, to arrange their camp for a several days' residence.

"Now, boys," said Old-man Crocker, "ef they see us, mind that you're to rush in an' clean 'em up, no matter whether we git the worst of it or not."

And on this private understanding, the three chiefs pledged their men by the most solemn obligations to abide by the issue of the battle, when, after consultation and conclusion that this was the best thing that offered, the besieged announced their acceptance of the challenge.

Rose had hung around Buck's neck, begging him to wait; Beth had sat silent near Six-foot Si, with her lips compressed and her eyes on the ground, but the judgment of the men prevailed, and they went out.

Then Rose lay in her sister's arms, more dead than alive, only her lips yet burning with Buck's last passionate kiss; and Beth, now strangely calm, held her and gazed upon her with tearless eyes, threading her hair with her fingers.

Outside, Six-foot Si faced Old-man Crocker, Bareback Buck faced Dandy Dave, and Bowie-knife 'Bijah faced Hank Budlong, at twelve paces.

"Do you give me a boy, an' an idiot at that?"

cried the burly outlaw, with the scorn of a Goliath.

At a little distance stood the ruffian army. In the entrance to the rocky stronghold watched Doc Cranch.

The signal was given, and six revolvers flashed in unison!

At the report, Rose started up wildly. Beth bowed her head, and uttered a low moan.

"Hurrah!" shouted Doc Cranch. "We've won!"

"But his cheer of triumph was drowned by such a chorus of yells as surely were never before heard outside of Tartarus!"

Electrified by conflicting hope and fear, both girls sprung to the entrance of their retreat.

What first attracted the eye was a sea of human devils rushing down upon them with menaces fit to daunt the stoutest heart.

But nearer by were other figures, which the eyes of love sought in an agony of fear.

Dandy Dave had gone down before Bareback Buck's unerring aim.

Buck himself had turned to see how it fared with his pard, Bowie-knife 'Bijah.

'Bijah had dropped upon his knees, then forward on his hands, from which position he stared at Hank Budlong, who, with yells of triumph, was rushing upon him, drawing his bowie, as if determined to finish by scalping his adversary.

The terms of the duel had not been strictly defined, whether the champions were to fight as individuals, or as parties; but in any event, the evident disregard of their pledge by the ruffianly crew left Buck at liberty to spring to the rescue of his friend.

He did so; but before he could act, 'Bijah suddenly recovered himself, rose upright on his knees, and plucking a bowie-knife from his belt, hurled it at the advancing outlaw; then fell forward upon his face.

Without any fear of molestation from Hank Budlong, Buck was then free to lift his friend to his feet and support him while they ran together back to the stronghold, with now no hope save of a short period for mutual leave-taking before death ushered them into the great mystery.

But what of Six-foot Si? Why that look of iron determination with which Beth Crawford, undaunted by the furious mob, rushed toward him with outstretched arms?

Old-man Crocker was raging like a madman, beating the air blindly with his arms, his fingers working spasmodically as if in clutching and tearing, while his voice rose in shrieks of execration.

Six-foot Si had turned half round, and was staggering, with drooping head and hanging arms, toward his friends, his weapon having dropped from his nerveless grasp.

Stung into heroism by the power of Beth's womanhood and her despair, Doc Cranch followed her with drawn revolvers, resolved to hold the mob in check or die in the attempt, while she supported Si back to temporary safety.

What was his amazement to see her, as she reached Six-foot Si, stoop, clasp him about the thighs, and lift him clear of the ground.

A moment she staggered, as with his colossal bulk he fell forward across her shoulder. Then she turned, and bore him, almost as he might have carried her, out of the reach of his enemies.

Doc Cranch emptied both revolvers into the crowd, retreating before them so as to enter the retreat just behind Beth, who had fairly overtaken Buck and his charge.

"Set me up ag'in' the rock so's I kin look out through that openin'," said 'Bijah to Buck. "I ain't much good in the legs, but I reckon I kin handle a shootin'-iron yet awhile, ef I'm braced in position."

But this was not necessary, and he was eased to the ground out of reach of bullets from outside.

Six-foot Si was taken from Beth's arms, and laid on his back; and while Buck and Doc Cranch sprung to the defense of the entrance against the rush of the assailants, Beth stood and gazed down at him in iron silence.

Rose had pressed her lover's arm, and looked her gratitude for his escape into his eyes. Now, divining the secret state of her sister's heart, and pained beyond expression by the contrast in her fortunes, she went to her, and wound her arms about her, in mute commiseration.

But Beth put her away with a gentle, yet firm movement. If he was indeed dead, let her endure this blow alone, as she had that other.

Was it a punishment? Had she been disloyal to the dead so soon? Had she begun to indulge the vain hope that it might be possible yet to repair the wreck of her life?

She paid no heed to the battle that was raging about the entrance to the stronghold. What mattered it—now, or a little later? Death! death! death! She was drunk with it!

Meanwhile, 'Bijah had crept to where he could help Buck and Doc, and among them they soon proved to the ruffians without that it was useless to make of themselves "food for powder."

Then came the end—cheers, yells of baffled

rage, and the wild music of a running fight receding further and further in the distance.

Then two doughty heroes charged the stronghold, and effected an entrance where all that ruffian horde had failed.

But no sooner were they in than they were taken captive, first alternately, and then both together, by Rose, who surfeited them with tears and kisses and praise.

"Nonsense!" cried Cass, modestly. "It was the sheerest luck. We did nothing but follow our noses till they led us into a-camp of the jolliest fellows you ever saw. They never stopped to listen to anything but that there was some fighting to do, when they tumbled Mart and me up behind a couple of fellows, and ordered us to lead off. Then every mother's son of 'em made a dead break for the seat of war. Nobody staid behind for want of a mount. They all had Shank's mares, if nothing better; and the way they put 'em to their paces was good for sore eyes! And fight? Well, now, you ought to have seen 'em! If somebody don't go out and call them off, there won't be a grease-spot of those ruffians left when they get through with 'em."

However, this was a slight exaggeration. As a matter of fact, the outlaws, being all mounted, while their assailants were mostly on foot, made good their escape, carrying the rivals of Bloody Run with them.

Both were severely wounded, but even at that they were in much better case than Hank Budlong.

'Bijah had "left nothin' to clean up!" Six-foot Si was put in the litter in which Joe Moran had passed his last hours, and a similar one was constructed for Bowie-knife 'Bijah.

They were carried to the camp of the fellows whom Cass and Mart had brought to the rescue, which—what do you think?—proved to be located on the spot marked out by the cryptogram!

The rich deposit had been rediscovered only a few days before, and the site filled up by one of those remarkable stampedes which still make western camps of hundreds of souls appear or disappear in a single night.

Both Beth and Si were truthful in denying possession of the cryptogram. Both had committed it to memory, and then secreted the paper at Mulligan's Bend, so that even by capturing their persons their enemies could not rob them of the precious secret.

But now that all had come to naught in another way, they had no regrets. All agreed that, if secured, the gold would have been so drenched in blood as to give them no happiness. Besides, they were amply compensated for its loss by the inheritance for which Judge Jim Rountree had plotted so desperately.

Beth nursed Six-foot Si back to his old royal strength and magnificent manhood.

With a delicacy which the most polished gentleman could not have excelled, he said nothing of his love till he saw her radiant with an unclouded beauty that rivaled Rose's own. Then one day, without warning, he put his arms about her, and gazed into her face till, with swift-coming tears of happy love, she mutely lifted her lips to receive his betrothal kiss.

Cass and Mart are prime favorites among the jolly fellows of Camp Cryptogram, and when local celebrities are to be puffed, Bowie-knife 'Bijah is to this day pointed out as one of *The Champion Three*.

THE END.

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